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Self-forgiveness: A narrative phenomenological study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty

of the Psychology Department

McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

John W. Beiter

March 2007

Director: Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.

Reader: Michael Sipiora, Ph.D.

Reader: Will W. Adams, Ph.D.

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I want to acknowledge my research participants and the courageous effort they put forth in supporting me by sharing selflessly.

Lastly, I wanted to thank all the clients that I have had the honor to serve these past years toward the fulfillment of my dream.

### Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, who selflessly supported me and continually reminded me through his love how important completing this journey together was even when we were physically apart...I love you!

To my mother who cared for me in immeasurable ways as only a loving Mom could and for always encouraging me to do my best and let God do the rest.

To my Dad, who is no longer alive, thanks for telling me you were proud of the path I chose and for guiding me along the way.

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### *Abstract*

This dissertation critically explored both theoretical and research findings pertaining to self-forgiveness, especially as it related to psychology. An important, though rather apparent finding or conclusion derived from this literature review was that there is an astounding paucity of both theoretical and research work about self-forgiveness within psychology. This lack or shortcoming holds, surprisingly, even in those disciplines perhaps associated more intuitively with self-forgiveness, for example theological and religious studies, and philosophy. Moreover, a contamination, conflation, or supplementarity characterized the relationship between forgiveness and self-forgiveness, such that no clear consensus exists with respect to the distinctions or similarities between those concepts. Additionally, it seemed clear that the very understanding of self-forgiveness (both academic and lay) is premised on, or seriously mediated by, cultural and religious influences, such as the primacy of a retributive “eye-for-an-eye” response to perceived wrongs, over that of forgiveness. This dissertation consequently attempted to contribute to lacunae in both the psychological research and theoretical literature. To that end, an interpretive study was undertaken. Three research participants, all of who reported an instance of self-forgiveness, were interviewed at great length and depth, their stories providing the data for this research. Using the theoretical insights of Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1985) and Daniel Polkinghorne (Polkinghorne 1983, 1989, 2005) as departure point, the data was analyzed in terms of the manner in which humans make sense of their lives in narrative. Results indicate a severe disjuncture between the experience of self-forgiveness and the common-sense cultural understanding, as well as the dominant academic understanding thereof, primarily and fundamentally

inasmuch as the path to self-forgiveness seems to pivot on the suspension of the belief in, or the appropriation of the right to, an eye-for-an-eye retribution toward self [or other]. Undoubtedly the primary finding of the research, the implications are far-reaching and dramatic, not only with respect to a theoretical challenge to prevailing concepts of forgiveness and self-forgiveness, but also in the applied and clinical sphere of psychotherapy. In addition, the research suggests the interconnectedness of self-forgiveness with interpersonal forgiveness – forgiving another. These are not separate and distinct concepts but interrelated such that the forgiveness of another can only be granted by first forgiving oneself.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

As a clinician, it seemed to me that so many of my clients sought relief from wrongs they felt they had committed against themselves and/or others. In a general sense, it felt as if the dynamic that was involved in this process in some way or other pertained to forgiveness in general, and self-forgiveness in particular. In fact, some clients named the process directly as relating to forgiveness, and one particular client told me repeatedly that while he seemed capable of forgiving others, he was not able to forgive himself for certain choices he made. While I could understand what the client was saying at some logical and cognitive level, I knew there was an understanding of the process that eluded me, and that I deeply desired. In fact, I increasingly came to feel that this inability to forgive the self stood in the way of optimal therapeutic progress. Other clients, as well, seemed unable to let go of negative feelings associated with choices they made or events they were party to, in a sense, to forgive themselves for those choices or their participation in certain experiences and events. Hence, I became particularly interested in the notion of self-forgiveness, beyond and in addition to the broader concept of forgiveness itself. It became increasingly important for me to understand what a client knew, or thought about forgiveness, and how they had experienced it.

### An initial understanding of Self-Forgiveness

Reflecting back on those therapeutic dialogues and exchanges referenced above, it seemed that most of my clients talked about and understood self-forgiveness almost exclusively or primarily in an overtly cognitive manner. Many would reference what others had to say about the topic, often relying on biblical teachings from their religious upbringings as a source of their knowledge, but even for something so intimately part of



the individual's identity as religion, there still seemed to be something missing. The topic still seemed intellectualized and somewhat removed from intimate, personal experience. In fact, it was precisely this sense of an experiential and affective component to understanding self-forgiveness that struck me as missing. This was true not only at the level of relating what clients thought forgiveness and/or self-forgiveness "was", but also in that they had so few models for (self) forgiveness, both in public life and in their more intimate circle of friends and family, from whom they could draw for a fuller experiential and affective sense of what it might be about. Indeed, I particularly noticed, at this initial phase of the dissertation interest, how few clients reported having experienced, or being capable of, self-forgiveness and/or forgiveness; for that matter, how few instances there were of forgiveness and self-forgiveness in secular, public life in general.

Another dynamic that struck me early, even before any serious or formal research into self-forgiveness was undertaken, and mostly from therapeutic conversations with clients, related to a seeming confusion between self-forgiveness and forgiveness. Sometimes clients would speak about the process or suggest that the process was distinct and separable, while at other times it seemed as if they simply meant one and the same dynamic or process. Some clients, for example, told me on numerous occasions that others told her/him that s/he was forgiven, or that God had forgiven her/him, but that it was not enough inasmuch as the client could not forgive her/himself. In these cases, clearly, there seemed to be the assumption of two kinds of processes, of a distinction between forgiveness and self-forgiveness. In other cases, this distinction was much less obvious.

From these experiences, I came to question what (and how) we really know about self-forgiveness? Perhaps even what (and how) we really know about forgiveness?

Relatedly, in what we knew already, was there something we failed to comprehend or know (for example if *knowing* something implies a predominantly cognitive endeavor<sup>1</sup>)? Further, why is it that there are so few examples of self-forgiveness in our lives and what inhibits or prevents us from embracing (self) forgiveness such that we can live it in our daily lives?

There is, of course, an assumptive leap here, namely that knowing about self-forgiveness in the absence of an experiential comprehension thereof does not facilitate our ability to engage with and optimally benefit from whatever healing powers it may possess. This assumption will be examined in greater detail in the chapters that follow. For now, what is important is the initial suspicion that a rational/cognitive understanding of self-forgiveness seems the norm, even within the most authoritative texts on the matter, most particularly those of the Judeo-Christian religions. For example, by the hermeneutics of influential Biblical scholars and preachers like John Calvin (1990/1550) in his treatise, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and Jonathan Edwards' (1966/1741) famous sermon entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", humankind is intrinsically evil and in need of deliverance through forgiveness. James Joyce articulates a similar sentiment in his literary recollection of "Boundless extension of torment, incredible intensity of suffering, unceasing variety of torture – this is what the divine majesty, so outraged by sinners, demands" (Joyce, 1996, p 131). Now, however, it is

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<sup>1</sup> It may well be that this comment references the stereotypical distinction between a natural scientific knowing that privileges explanation and a human science knowing that accords primacy to understanding. If so, the fuller, comprehensive promise of the human science understanding was markedly absent from the everyday discourse of my clients, as I suspect it is from the dominant academic.

highly unlikely that this abstract, albeit highly influential, notion of humankind being born evil and hence in need of forgiveness, plays out in the singular experiential moment whereby one holds a newborn and beholds the miracle of his or her birth. In fact, most people are wont to describe or understand birth and new life in terms of love, innocence, or promise than that of evil, sin, or some or other ontological origin of forgiveness. There is a disconnect between the abstract and cognitive understanding of forgiveness and people's everyday experience.

This disconnect or disjuncture is also nurtured by the Biblical ambiguity about the origins of forgiveness. To what extent, for example, is forgiveness the pure ability of an all-powerful God as opposed to the corrupted attempts of a fallen, sinful human? Put another way, is it not the assumption that only God can forgive, that only God can grant forgiveness, and by extension, that self-forgiveness is similarly dependent on God's grace and mercy. In this Biblical sense of forgiveness, and God's administration thereof, is self-forgiveness not an impossibility, and unattainable for mere fallen mortals?

But having this initial suspicion about the Judeo-Christian relation to forgiveness also opened up questions about how other religions viewed forgiveness, and whether some understanding of those perspectives might offer some insights into the phenomenon (if it is that, or can be described such). Consequently, the dissertation contains an examination of precisely such points of similarity and divergence between and among some dominant religious traditions with respect to self-forgiveness.

Yet, whereas it may be true that there is often a gap between religious prescripts and daily life, it is also true that religious assumptions and beliefs have sedimented and seeped into the very fabric of culture and the everyday. Even a cursory examination of

the general tone and tenure of the popular cultural response to being wronged, however, reveals a narrative much less about forgiveness than about revenge or retribution. One is hard pressed, for example, to contest the fact that the majority of popular cultural stories are grounded in the notion that the “bad guy” is always caught in the end and (severely) punished for his or her wrongdoing. This is the premise of the “action hero” movie format, which accounts for some of the highest monetary revenues. The basic premise of a “bad guy” breaking the law, transgressing the common good, and causing some harm to an innocent, authorizes the “good guy” to seek redress in revenge and punishment. “Justice” is served by the “bad guy” getting shot, blown up, or severely beaten before he/she is taken away in cuffs or a body bag. Indeed, in the face of being wronged, punishment through revenge, retaliation, and retribution seem the more readily acceptable and culturally agreed upon solution, certainly much more so than forgiveness. And, even if the “bad guy” seemingly “gets away” with his misdeeds, he will ultimately get his just deserts in the image of a punishing afterlife of eternal damnation.

The point is therefore that punishment, not forgiveness, is fundamentally entrenched within the culture as an appropriate and satisfying response to wrongs committed against others, and ourselves. Consequently, it “feels good” when the “bad guy” gets “what’s coming to him” in the end. Similarly, for our own wrongs, the narrative is such that we redeem ourselves by depriving ourselves or paying penance for wrongs we have committed. The same narrative that judges others in “proper” punishment also holds for us and the supposed wrongs we commit against ourselves. Of course there is an apparent problem in adjudicating when the punishment is enough, or when it is to stop.

If we intuitively and culturally reach for punishment for sins or wrongs, the question emerges as to its restorative utility. Put another way, does punishment lead to a sense of healing or wholeness, or restore us to the human community? It seems, from my practice, that the answer is no, and that, in fact, there is a paradox in the punishing response, namely that of the stationary and perpetual treadmill, where we will have to punish ourselves even more for having punished ourselves (Rooney, 1989).

There is, though, an even further paradox and dilemma, located in the foundational premise that one first needs to learn something for oneself before one can do for others. The implication is that one must be able to forgive oneself in order to forgive others. If now, it transpires that clients have a harder time forgiving themselves than others, either the commonsense premise is violated, or what clients believe forgiveness to be is not complete. Perhaps one needs to revisit the assumption that forgiveness and self-forgiveness are separate and distinct concepts. Indeed, it may very well be that every definition of forgiveness implies an act of self-forgiveness as a starting point.

Having presented, up until this point, a rather intuitive introductory narrative and motivating backdrop for this dissertation's interest, it should be added that I tried – as I struggled alongside my clients with these thorny issues of forgiveness – to access my psychological training to perhaps shed light on the dilemmas posed in the therapeutic room. It seemed that psychology, as well, approaches forgiveness through the prism of the rational cognitive. And while there has been somewhat of a resurgence in the literature about forgiveness in recent years, self-forgiveness as distinct from, or a distinctive variant of, forgiveness has been almost wholly absent from psychological research scrutiny. Indeed, the relationship of self-forgiveness to forgiveness is grossly

under researched and -theorized. This state of affairs is unfortunate considering that self-forgiveness could play a critical role in psychotherapy (Canale, 1990).

This dissertation therefore aims to enter the research and theoretical gap in the literature by exploring the contours, processes, and dynamics of forgiveness in general, and self-forgiveness in particular. I will attempt to address those motivating questions posed earlier, and to come to a more complete and thorough understanding of forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

The next chapter presents a critical review of the literature, examining and holding up to scrutiny the ways in which forgiveness and self-forgiveness have been defined, structured, situated and understood. This chapter also attempts to highlight the underlying and foundational assumptions “beneath” the most popular or widely accepted definitions of forgiveness. Arising from this inquiry, I pose several critical comments, and highlight several areas of shortcoming, limitation, and concern within the extant literature. I then proceed to place the present study in comparative relief against the existing literature, illustrating why it is important, and how it attempts to contribute to the psychological literature in particular. The chapter on “Motivation, Method and Procedure” also articulates the research questions, the research procedure, design and methods employed in the study. A “Results” section follows, where I provide an analysis of the data collected through interviews, and a final chapter interprets and discusses the results. Additionally, the “Discussion” chapter includes suggestions for further research, preliminary implications for therapy, and broader suggestions regarding the role of forgiveness and self-forgiveness in society.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

What follows is a review of the current literature regarding forgiveness and self-forgiveness. The review starts by examining the broader notion of forgiveness and proceeds to examine self-forgiveness. While the literature on both forgiveness and self-forgiveness are not extensive, at least not in psychology, it does appear as if more has been written about forgiveness, and the underlying assumption seem to be that it is universally understood, and perhaps even prior to, or foundational to, self-forgiveness. Beyond psychology, forgiveness clearly has value in religious studies, theology and philosophy. Consequently, this review will utilize some of the insights from those disciplines, but the primary focus will remain psychology's use, application and research regarding forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

### Forgiveness

In 1998, Robert Enright and Joanna North completed a monumental work, entitled *Exploring Forgiveness*, broadly considered foundational to an understanding of the concept forgiveness. Their academic endeavor lays claim to the astounding fact that only 110 scholarly works addressed forgiveness (in English) from the fifth century through 1970. If this is so for the general and canonical, it comes as no surprise that psychology, as a specific scholarly subset, is characterized by similar or more pressing research paucity.

Even after forgiveness had been raised as an issue worth exploring, Enright and Zell (1989) argued that it continued to be largely overlooked in psychology. This is an unfortunate oversight, according to Canale (1990), McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen

(2000) and others, who believed it to promise critical potential in psychotherapy. The little discussion there was of forgiveness within the context of therapy (e.g. Benson, 1992; Hope, 1987; McCullough, Sandage & Worthington, 1997; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990) has emphasized the forgiveness of others, while the reluctance of psychology to explore forgiveness in depth has dissuaded some mental health professionals from focusing on forgiveness (Kirkpatrick, 1995). Fitzgibbons (1999) and Rowe, Halling, Davies, Leifer, Powers, & van Bronkhorst (1989) were hopeful that forgiveness would eventually be accepted into mainstream psychology, arguing that it held much illuminating promise for psychology. These authors argued that forgiving others helped heal emotional wounds while not forgiving kept the individual tied not only to the injury, but to the injurer as well.

Indeed, these few authors advocating for an examination of forgiveness within psychology, hold that forgiveness can serve as a catalyst to change our views of the past, as well as impact on the personal, social and clinical. From a personal perspective, the lack of forgiveness retards a person developmentally and keeps him or her “stuck” in the past. Clinically, forgiveness is one of the most powerful healing balms available and when applied can reduce bitterness, resentment and blame (Hunter, 1978). It can be the change agent needed to break the patterns of abuse that perpetuate in family dynamics throughout the generations. From a social outlook, the events of 9/11 offer a startling example in the form of the question; what if the United States chose to respond with forgiveness?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I imagine that some readers may find this question naïve, may stand incredulous toward it, or have great difficulty imagining what “responding with forgiveness” may entail. Yet, while simplified (one needs to factor in aspects of justice, even a merciful justice, for example), I believe the point can be made that the reader’s



Rowe et al. (1989) highlighted that psychology steered clear of forgiveness based on an assumption that religious scholars and theologians had thoroughly examined and explained the concept, and that it “belonged” in those disciplines more so than in psychology. On the surface, such reasoning would appear justified based on how central forgiveness is to the Judeo-Christian traditions. One other reason Rowe et al. (1989) presented for the lack of psychological study on forgiveness has to do with how psychology has been aligned with, and as, a natural science. Inasmuch as the natural science approach to research prioritized the experimental and objective, a complex and so thoroughly subjective a concept as forgiveness posed a thorny problem for empirical observation and experimentation.

To complicate matters further, it is not only that there has been little research in psychology on forgiveness, but there seem to be an even prior difficulty: that of defining even what forgiveness is. Consequently, and especially since the 1970s, an important aspect of the study of forgiveness revolved around its definition. One of the most prominent and oft cited definitions belongs to Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991). Building on earlier work, including that of North (1987), Cunningham (1985), and Smedes (1984), forgiveness is defined “as a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge toward an offender who acts unjustly, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her” (Enright, 1996, p.108). Within this definition, forgiveness can only occur when there has been an unjust and profound hurt which the offended party volunteers to forgive. Additionally, forgiveness includes cognitive,

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response may already be a barometer for the manner in which we gravitate as a culture –seemingly intuitively and “naturally” - towards punishment or revenge as opposed to forgiveness, the teaching of the turning of the cheek notwithstanding.

affective, and behavioral factors and is not contingent on the current attitude of the offender. Forgiveness does not involve forgetting or amnesia, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) poignantly warns. It is important not to forget so that one learns not to let the offense occur again; it is not an unconditional pardon to let it happen again. Moreover, forgiveness does not insure or guarantee reconciliation, or even presuppose it, as this step involves the participation of another party or parties.

Fitzgibbons (1999) agreed with Enright and the Human Development Study Group's (1991) definition, adding that forgiveness does not guarantee that all emotional pain, including anger and resentment, has been fully processed. An opposing viewpoint of the emotionality of forgiveness, proffered by Yandell (1998), was that in order for forgiveness to be successful, all negative emotions must be eliminated, even if the harmful injustices are perpetuated.

More recently, McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) defined forgiveness as a set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the offending person; to maintain estrangement from the offender; and to be increasingly motivated by conciliation and good will toward the offender, despite the debilitating actions of said person(s). They see forgiveness as "...the lay concept that people invoke to describe the transformation that occurs when their motivations to seek revenge and to maintain estrangement from an offending relationship partnership diminish, and their motivation to pursue conciliatory action increases" (McCullough, Worthington and Rachal, 1997, p. 322). In other words, forgiveness is explained as the movement from retaliation to reconciliation and the process that bridges the two opposing extremes.

Hargrave and Sells (1997), in turn, define forgiveness as an “effort in restoring love and trustworthiness to relationships so that victims and victimizers can put an end to destructive entitlement” (p. 43). It would seem apparent that their definition links forgiveness with reconciliation, again making forgiveness conditional.

In light of all these responses to their influential initial definition, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) recently presented several comprehensive refinements. These include dimensions of “deep versus superficial” and “stable versus unstable”. For example, something that has been taken away and can never be replaced, such as the murder of a loved one would represent a “deep” dimension of forgiveness versus a “superficial” dimension of forgiveness, which could be seen as where one has embarrassed a loved one. A “stable” dimension could be seen as one in which the unjust act is continuous and long-standing such as the emotional abuse of a spouse whereas “unstable” dimensions might involve infrequent acts calling for forgiveness, such as the occasional insensitivity of a person toward a loved one in public venues, for example. An immediately apparent difficulty with the term “dimensions” involve the extent to which there are evaluative judgments to be made - what is “deep” for one, may not be so for another and one person’s threshold for characterizing acts as stable may be vastly different from another’s.

Forgiveness was presented on a developmental person-centered continuum, in which the expression of forgiveness was influenced by religion, ritual and culture and could be spiritual, emotional or cognitive, respectively. For example, the Christian religion influenced the expression of forgiveness by stating that all people are entitled to forgiveness whether they repent or not. Spiritually, forgiveness is to be expressed

unconditionally. The impact of this Christian legacy is particularly noticeable in comparison, for example, with the Jewish tradition that requires not only repentance but also restitution before forgiveness is granted. Spiritually, forgiveness is expressed conditionally.

Finally, Thoresen (2001) highlighted that forgiveness was difficult, demanding and requiring courage. Enright et al. (1991), Fitzgibbons (1986), and Hope (1987) concur, arguing that forgiveness takes time and consumes much energy, even as the effects are profound. It includes more than not feeling anger and resentment, that is, the mere absence of those feelings. Furthermore, forgiveness is not about excusing the wrongdoing and it does not require reconciliation (Enright et al., 1991), but is more a process of releasing the urge to retaliate and a movement towards the re-acceptance of the offender's humanity with or without restoration of the relationship, which ultimately leads to healing (Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990).

Upon closer examination of these definitions, ostensibly and particularly about forgiveness, it seems that self-forgiveness is implicated, implied, or otherwise recalled. And, while it is not theorized at any great length on its own terms, it does seem - in almost all the definitions above - that the notion of, and need for, self-forgiveness is invoked as a catalyst of sorts, or a starting point in subjective agency, or some other supplementary sequel that completes the circle or act of forgiveness. In each definition, there is an emotional wound that the victim is reacting toward. The wounds appear in anger, resentment, and the need for revenge. It may very well be that an inability on the part of the victim to heal from these wounds through self-forgiveness may result in an inability or difficulty with offering forgiveness in turn. In each definition, the victim is

implicitly expected to forgive her/himself (via “a willingness to abandon...”) for feeling the hurtful emotions as a way to heal these wounds, even as the definitions don’t explicitly name this process as self-forgiveness. Forgiveness, according to these definitions only need take place when the victim has been wounded. One would not need to forgive another if one did not feel or acknowledge the other’s act as unjust. Surprisingly, however, this dis-aggregation of self-forgiveness and forgiveness is neither theorized nor researched in any depth.

Another problem with the widely accepted definition of Enright’s (1996), relates to the “right to resentment.” Several complicating questions are begged by this phrase: How has it come to be a right? Where does one learn to be resentful? How is this lesson taught and by whom? Is it appropriate to think of resentment as a right, The Right to Resentment, as it were, either primordial and natural, or guaranteed and granted by a nation-state in its constitution, such as the Right to Bear Arms? Could it be, from a religious perspective, that a “right to resentment” allowed the banishment of Adam and Eve, or that “the war on terrorism” concedes a national or cultural right to resentment, condemnation and revenge? Or is it less a right than an entitlement to punishment? And, as a preferred method for healing, does the definition or understanding of forgiveness in terms of abandoning a right not limit its therapeutic potential? Again, none of these complications are theorized and wrestled with in any great or satisfying detail.

Another consequence of the definition as an abandonment of rights is that it does not explain the experience of forgiveness (highlighting its need), and the possible motivations behind it, such as the engagement of one’s own emotions. The only “right” that makes sense when one has been hurt is the right to one’s feelings. However, even

assuming such a right, in an admittedly individualistic manner, this assumption is qualified by placement within a cultural narrative where feelings are not valued, are attributed in a gendered manner to be the operative domain for men, or broadly conflicted and/or subordinated to reason. Not surprisingly, the definition offered by Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) is carefully worded to exclude specific mention of the words *feelings* and *emotions*, even as others have included those words.

Additionally, it may very well be the case that the omission of feelings and emotions from the definition serves an empirical, natural scientific research agenda. Psychology, in this model, is defined very precisely as involving human behavior and mental processes, largely because those are the aspects of being human that can be measured, that are observable, and that can be given for empirical comparison, in contrast to feelings, emotions, and the spiritual which are not. If, now, similar decision rules inform a definition of forgiveness, the irony is apparent; that this process that is so fundamentally and completely linked in the everyday and experiential understanding to matters of emotion, feeling, and spirit, is defined academically without any reference to those very factors.

In a very real sense, the bulk of the psychological literature pertaining to forgiveness can be characterized as a back and forth about its definition, and a speculative suspicion that it might play some or other beneficial role in therapy. Additionally, almost all the literature laments the paucity of research in the area and pleads for greater research efforts into the psychological implications of forgiveness.

Having argued that psychology pays scant attention to forgiveness, it is true that some disciplines, such as religious studies and theology did address the topic. It

behooves us to cast a broader net for an understanding of forgiveness, also because a large number of psychological studies and authors often take as their departure point precisely those insights from other disciplines.

Within the Judeo-Christian religious authorities, the call for forgiveness is in relation to a sin or trespass. For Christians and Jews, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 3-17) can be referenced to define sin, as a way to gain an understanding of what one might need to forgive or be forgiven for. Following from this logic, in Enright's (1996) definition of forgiveness, where one acts unjustly towards another, could easily dovetail with the notion of being sinned against, for example, "*thou shall not steal*", "*thou shall not murder*", etc. However, there is a critical implication and elaboration about "being wronged" or "sinned against" that is often missed, namely that the very feelings of anger, resentment or vengefulness conjured up by the unjust treatment are themselves considered sins. The Bible warns against un-pure thoughts, claiming that one has committed the sin when one has felt it in her/his heart even without acting upon it (Matthew 5:28). The warning is made even more explicit when Jesus teaches one of the two greatest commandments, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 19: 19).

Therefore, there seems to be an unacknowledged logic at work here which might hold that in order for the victim to forgive one who has acted unjustly toward her/him, the victim must first forgive her/himself for feeling angry, resentful and/or revengeful toward the offender. In other words, self-forgiveness is absolutely necessary before one can forgive others, a sentiment expressed in the Bible as well, for example, "...*First remove*

*the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"* (Matthew 7: 5).

Earlier, I argued with reference to Enright's canonical definition of forgiveness (1996) that it does not explore and wrestle with the *experience* of forgiveness, and the experiential emotionality and affect that seem so closely connected to it. Perhaps not altogether surprisingly, this very dynamic is also at work within Biblical iconography and representation in general. So, for example, while the Bible references Christ weeping, it is rarely represented pictorially in Western culture. Most images of Christ fail to display laughing, crying, or exhibiting any other emotion for that matter. Linking forgiveness with emotions or feelings seems to imply its devaluation. This is true both culturally, and academically, where another bias – that of emotion as subjectivity or unscientific contaminant – militates against its use. To support this statement, one has only to look back to the beginning of this section citing that not much has been written on the topic for many centuries. Stories abound in print where those that have taken the courageous journey to forgive, have ended up defending their "right" to forgive and have been ostracized for it. Even Christ was crucified after having forgiven those who had persecuted and condemned him.

Forgiveness is important in other religions as well. Buddhism, for example, sees forgiveness as a practice to prevent negatively laden emotions from infecting one's mental well being and harming others. Buddhism acknowledges that feelings of destruction and ill-will leave an imprint on one's mind (one's karma) and preferably encourages the cultivation of emotions, which leave a wholesome effect (Smith, 1958). When resentments have already surfaced, the Buddhist view is to calmly proceed to



release them by going back to their roots. Buddhism is centered on the release from suffering through meditation, receiving insight and serving others. Buddhism emphasizes the concepts of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity as a means to preventing resentments. These reflections are used to understand the context of suffering of self and others in the world. When self is seen as separate from others, it becomes poisonous from hatreds, obsessions, prides and divides one from others, thus, preventing compassion. Forgiveness represents an opportunity for the inner transformation of both victim and perpetrator and does not mean absolution (Ricard, 2002).

The practice of Hinduism includes performing atonement from one's wrongdoing – doing penance and asking for forgiveness. Penance is related to the law of Karma, which is the sum of all that an individual has done – past, present future. The present condition of each individual, that is how happy one is, how confused or calm, is based on what one has wanted and received in the past; and equally his or her present thoughts and decisions determine future states. The effects of those deeds actively create present and future experiences, which translates into making one responsible for his/her life and the pain in others. Hinduism understands forgiveness as a great power. The belief is that if one is armed with forgiveness then one cannot be defeated and that forgiveness is one of the characteristics of one born for a divine state (Smith, 1958).

In the Islamic tradition, forgiveness is a prerequisite for true and genuine peace. Islam teaches that Allah (God) is the most forgiving and is the original source of all forgiveness. Forgiveness often requires the repentance of those being forgiven and depending on the type of wrong committed, forgiveness can come from Allah, or from

human beings. The most sacred book of Islam, the Qur'an, does on occasion make allowances for violent behavior – defending one's faith, life or property – on the part of Muslim believers (Qur'an 9:12), and as such have been construed by some believers as condoning unforgiving behavior. Outside of these 'allowances' the Qur'an does not make any provisions for violent behavior and yet the debate remains heated to this day as to the interpretation of a defensive violence versus overly aggressive violence. The Qur'an is clear that it is better to forgive than to attack another (Smith, 1958).

Christianity teaches that forgiveness of others is one of the central spiritual duties of a Christian believer. Like Islam, God is considered the original source of all forgiveness and it is made freely available to the repentant believer because of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. As a condition to God's forgiveness as indicated through the Bible, the Christian believer is expected to forgive others. Additionally, the person who is forgiven is not necessarily released from obligations of material means. The Bible is replete with examples of how God will bind what is bound on earth with the unforgiving. Some commentators have nonetheless speculated on the influence of Hammurabi's code (the first written code of laws in human history), specifically the law dealing with 'an eye for an eye', in the Bible, and point to numerous examples where a response of seemingly righteous anger, retribution, or otherwise divinely sanctioned violence occur in the face of being wronged, as opposed to the unconditional forgiveness captured in the message of the turning of the other cheek.

Within the Christian denominations, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches teach that God's forgiveness is mediated by the church through traditional ritualistic acts known as confessions, which prepares one for the sacrament of receiving

Holy Communion. It is customary to make a confession of sins to an ordained priest and obtain absolution as a formal expression by the church of God's forgiveness. The Protestant tradition teaches that one receives forgiveness directly through a sincere expression of repentance to God, and that one completes this in the act of forgiving others, a far less informal approach. It is taught that Jesus' crucifixion is what enables God to grant forgiveness and it is through the sacrament of communion that one receives divine forgiveness. Martha Alken (1997) believed the sacrament was a hidden treasure of grace, healing, peace and spiritual growth. She claimed the tradition held that the sacrament had a dual purpose: to forgive sin, and to bring one the healing power of God's grace to guide one in daily life. She reminded that all of us share in the power to forgive, as given to the church by Jesus. Through baptism we were invited to share in God's power of unconditional love and forgiving. As such, one has the power to forgive the wrongs done to oneself and thereby release or cling to any accompanying resentments.

In Judaism, if a person harms another, and then sincerely apologizes to the wronged individual along with rectifying the wrong, then the wronged individual is religiously required to grant forgiveness. Judaism focuses on personal responsibility of the wrongdoer who is held accountable for his/her actions and must seek forgiveness from those whom s/he has harmed. Additionally, it is required that one must apologize to those s/he has harmed in order to be entitled to forgiveness. In contrast to Christianity, where the sinner must seek forgiveness from God, in Judaism, forgiveness is sought from the one who was wronged. Prior to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), Jewish believers will seek forgiveness from those they have wronged during the year and then during Yom Kippur they will seek forgiveness from God for sins they committed against

God during the year. God does not grant forgiveness for sins committed against other people, which stands out as a major difference from Christian theology. Judaism does not recognize confession of personal sin to a religious figure as part of the process of sin and repentance as Catholicism does. For that, one must approach and make repentance to the person whom one has wronged; then it is up to that person to grant forgiveness. In *Jesus*, Edward Schillebeeckx (1978) explained that in the Jewish tradition, the forgiveness of sins belonged solely to God, and while the high priest could declare a person free of sin, forgiveness could only be granted by God for sins against God. Again, there is no designated authority to whom one can confess sins; sins are confessed privately, in prayer, before God.

These views appear separated along two differing continuums; one is that forgiveness must be earned and the other is that it is a gift. Forgiveness earned could only be exercised through means of atonement, amends, restitution or sincere apology. This type of forgiveness usually requires a promise that the offending act or behavior will not be repeated and would remain conditioned on the actions or words of the wrongdoer. Certain religious views of forgiveness are aligned with this notion, specifically where forgiveness is received from one's God, such as Catholicism and other Christian denominations that practice penance. Viewing forgiveness as a gift, which Enright has alluded to in his definition, begins with a choice the forgiver makes to let go of the anger, resentment and revenge that resulted from the harmful act of the wrongdoer. The forgiver gives to oneself and the perceived wrongdoer freedom from resentment and guilt respectively. Forgiveness as a gift is unconditional, not requiring any repentance or contrition from the forgiven.

Illustrative as the preceding broad explanations are of the fundamental ways in which various religions understand and organize themselves around the notion of forgiveness, a particular experience and example serves to interrogate this notion even further. In *The Sunflower: on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness*, Simon Wiesenthal (1969) skillfully relates an experience from when he was a concentration camp prisoner during World War II. A dying Nazi soldier asks Simon for forgiveness – “I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him” (p. 54). While Wiesenthal has a response, he poses the question (his dilemma) to religious scholars, theologians, Buddhists, Rabbis, Priests and assorted others, 53 in total, and theirs were the ones chosen for publication. Using this text within the classroom, Eva Fleischner (as cited in Wiesenthal, 1969), a religious scholar, notes that her Jewish and Christian students are split on the subject of forgiveness. For the Jewish students, there is no forgiveness and for the Christians there appears to be.

This raises an interesting point in that it would seem impossible to come to a consensus on how Judeo-Christian religion views and understands forgiveness. From the Jewish perspective, the request for forgiveness from one person representing all of the Jews does not fit with atonement in that offenses committed against one’s fellow human beings can be achieved only through pacifying the injured party. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel (in Wiesenthal, 1969) strongly underlines this foundational principle of the Jewish faith that one must seek forgiveness from the person one offended – “No one can forgive crimes against other people” (p. 171).

We start to understand in this way that forgiveness is personal and while it involves another, it benefits the self. Taking it one step further, noted theologian

Dorothee Soelle (in Wiesenenthal, 1969) discussed what one seeks through forgiveness in the Jewish tradition is *teshuvah* – deliverance, changing one’s ways, a new beginning. Agreeing and questioning whether the notion of forgiving another person exists, noted author Rabbi Harold S. Kushner (in Wiesenenthal, 1969) claims to know that there is such a thing as being forgiven. “To be forgiven is to feel the weight of the past lifted from our shoulders, to feel the stain of past wrongdoing washed away...to feel free to step into the future unburdened by the precedent of who we have been and what we have done in previous times (pp 183-184).” What seems to be implicit in these responses is that one knows exactly how to attain or find one’s way onto the path to forgiveness.

Yet, it may not be true that there is homogeneity of consensus about Christian or Jewish adherents’ understanding of forgiveness, as informed by their respective religious scriptures. In fact, Fleischner (in Wiesenenthal, 1969) argues that Christians have misunderstood (and continue to) Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness. She highlights that even in the Lord’s Prayer, God is petitioned to *forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*, meaning our sins and not the sins of others. She believed that Christians have loosely translated that to mean, “we are to forgive anyone and everyone, whatever the wrong done to anyone” (p. 141). Jesus challenged us to forgive evil done to oneself and never hinted, alluded or otherwise suggested that we are to forgive the wrong done to another.

It would seem obvious then that Enright and his colleagues have formulated their definition of forgiveness from more of a Christian perspective than that of the Judaic tradition. One could argue that their definition calls to forgive anyone and everyone just as Fleischner has claimed. Forgiveness is defined as “a willingness to abandon one’s

right to resentment, condemnation and subtle revenge towards an offender who acts unjustly, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love towards him or her...therefore, a forgiver may unconditionally offer this gift regardless of the other's current attitude or behavior" (Enright, 1996, p. 108). According to Schimmel (2002), this definition represents the introduction of the study and appreciation of forgiveness into the discourse of secular psychology from a decidedly Christian ideology. Schimmel continues to note that other definitions, such as Worthington's (in McCullough, Sandage & Worthington, 1997), follow a similar path. In fact, the assumptions may be even prior to that of the specific religious scriptures, and point to an influential legacy of even earlier teachings and cultural norms, such as Hammurabi's code of an eye for an eye. Indeed, it is no stretch to read a tacit affirmation, at the very least, in Enright's definition of Hammurabi's right to act with "resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge" if someone acted unjustly toward me.

The tension, however, is that even given the argument of Hammurabi's influence, both within the Bible and Enright's definition, there is (and have been) an alternative, namely that of Jesus' example and teaching. Hence, for example, against the binary of the frequently quoted psychological fight or flight syndrome when confronted with threat (a person either reacts in retaliation, or tries to run away), Jesus' so called third way of standing firm without fighting or fleeing, present an alternative. In the Bible, Jesus is said to have faced his accusers without acknowledging their accusations – *"And while he was being accused by the chief priests and elders, he said nothing. Then Pilate said to Him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against You?" But He answered him not one word..."* (Matthew 27:12-14). In this way, Jesus taught a way of being that

does not separate one from the other through fight or flight but stays connected with humankind as a way of answering the unjust act.

The Enright definition consequently privileges and emphasizes an eye for an eye justice, in so doing downplaying or negating teachings that clearly identify another way of dealing with wrongs. Hence, while Schimmel (2002) argues that Enright et al.'s view of forgiveness reflects an underlying Christian understanding of the phenomenon even though it "makes no mention of God, of Jesus' passion in which he bore his suffering with patience and forgave those who tortured him to death by crucifixion, of the New Testament teachings "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:38) and "love your enemy," (Matthew 5:44) or of the Christian belief in God's gracious gift of forgiveness – which he grants even to not-yet-repentant sinners because of his love and compassion for all of humankind (Schimmel, 2002, p. 45)", it is a Christian reading or understanding that is not exhaustive of Christianity in that it privileges some parts thereof to the exclusion of others. This point is illustrated more vividly where Schimmel (2002) argues that Enright et al. also voices that Christian tradition of forgiveness where one is expected to imitate Christ in the forgiveness of others and offer it as a gift just as one understands God's granting that to all sinners.

It is clear from the above that the underlying cultural and religious assumptions, while mostly hidden from view, are crucial for the manner in which forgiveness is understood. In another example, it is so that if a Hammurabian eye for eye were called for, and understood as the expected response, then forgiveness as a way of responding would absolutely be a gift. Yet, the question remains if there were an alternative to the retributive response, how would forgiveness be defined and/or understood? In other



words, if we begin with forgiveness as a non-gift, how does that change our understanding of it?

Some authors have hinted at, or expounded on, the notion of forgiveness less as gift to the other, than to the self. A text written by seminary professor, Lewis Smedes (1996), for example argues that forgiveness is not a gift one gives to another person but instead, is something one does inside for oneself, an approach that is also taken by Rutledge (2002). Kushner (as cited in Wiesenthal, 1969) also locates forgiveness within, stating, “forgiving happens inside us, it represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly a letting go of the role of victim” (p. 184). Forgiveness is not something you do for someone else, but to free yourself from the continuation of pain and anger. It is a gift one offers oneself. There is confirmation here in that forgiveness of others must begin with the self and yet it seems to remain unacknowledged and unexplored in much of the writings on the subject.

Smedes (1996) sees forgiveness as not letting the other person “off the hook” but understanding that the person is only human and capable of error, that is, recognizing through empathy that the forgiver could have made the same choice the wrongdoer made given similar circumstances. Daniel Johnston (2000), and Lynn Woodland (2000) are among those that have viewed forgiveness from the fishing hook analogy. They have said that the one getting off the hook is not the forgiven but the forgiver. It is about freeing oneself from the bounds that bind one to the wrongdoer. Eldonna Bouton (1999) even mentions that in Sanskrit forgiveness meant, “to untie” oneself from the wrongdoer, another way, arguably, to state the theme of getting off the hook – “it is you that are being let off the hook” (p. 16). It becomes a gift that one gives oneself and not

necessarily a gift given to the other. In fact, these authors would argue that forgiveness is not a gift given to others – in opposition to some of the religious views previously mentioned.

Yet, having argued that much of our understanding of forgiveness derives in large part from our religious placement, it is as true that our cultural placement mediates and inflects the expression and understanding of forgiveness. A simple search of the Internet or a leisurely stroll down the self-help aisles of any major bookstore illustrates precisely such modifications and inflections – many secular and “spiritual.” These offerings, however, are simply diverse, with no clear consensus as to what forgiveness is or entails, fundamentally. The comment on Father Mahoney’s website ([www.jmahoney.com](http://www.jmahoney.com)), tongue in check as it may be, holds true also for this secular variety. He says:

Different churches, different clergy, different [religious] traditions all seem to have different understandings of...forgiving. Interestingly, each is absolutely convinced that their view is right and everyone else is wrong! Hmmm. (Mahoney, 1997, Para. 24)

Thomas Long (2001) alerts us to another problem, one related perhaps to an overly cognitive understanding of Biblical teaching, as well as the absence of prominent examples of forgiveness in our culture. Reflecting on past classes he has taught in homiletics, the art of preaching, Long (2001), a theological professor at Emory University, remarks that, on the first day of school he regularly gave the ‘Beginning Preaching’ class a surprise test, one he stated, he had no intention of grading. He read them a list of theological words and they were to write a paragraph taking an abstract theological issue and explain it in a way that made it a reality for them. As he moved

down the list to the word ‘forgiveness’ he stated that the pens stopped writing. The discussion that followed he reported was about small and trivial claims. His major concern was that “They (the freshman class) were preparing to teach the gospel, but one of the central claims of the gospel, the promise of deep, healing forgiveness, was something they had not experienced for themselves” (p. 30). Johann Christoph Arnold (2000) took to writing about those rare experiences in his book *Why Forgive?* He explores, examines and extols the virtues of those who made the difficult decision to forgive and shares their emotionally laden stories as a way to show and maybe somehow answer Long’s unfinished reiteration of Alexander Pope’s (1711) famous quote “To err is Human; to Forgive...” in saying that ‘while erring is human’ - forgiving uncovers the divine that each of us is capable of expressing, living and feeling.

It would seem apparent, from this review that whereas there is an intuitive or ready-to-hand sense that “everyone” knows what forgiveness is all about, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the literature concedes that there is no one right way to define forgiveness and point to a definitive path. This is true in religion and religious studies, in psychology, as well as the commons of everyday culture. But beyond difficulty with definition and interpretation, it is also curious and profoundly striking that much more has been written about what forgiveness is not than what it is, and very particularly for the purposes of this dissertation, how it is lived and experienced. While there is variation in the definition of forgiveness, there remains a consistent, and underlying tone that it holds healing and helpful potential to the offended. Yet, inasmuch as there seems to be a crucial aspect of self-forgiveness implicated in this healing potential, this aspect remains grossly under researched and examined.

### Self-Forgiveness

In his 1996 article, *Counseling within the forgiveness triad: On forgiving, receiving forgiveness, and self-forgiveness* Robert Enright claims that only one published article exists on the topic of self-forgiveness (that of Bauer et al., 1992) before his contribution. This article of Bauer et al. (1992) was not in a journal devoted singularly to psychology or counseling, but was published in the Journal of Religion and Health, confirming once again that religion might well have been the primary referent for an understanding of self-forgiveness in psychology. In philosophy, as well, Snow (1993) remarked on self-forgiveness' absence and neglect. Bauer et al. (1992) claimed there were very few empirical studies on this subject, which they believed were central to human growth and psychological wholeness and which, if so, once again begged the question about the reason(s) behind its neglect.

Using his work on forgiveness as a departure point, Enright (1996) extrapolates into the realm of self-forgiveness; saying that whatever one offers another in interpersonal forgiveness is now offered to oneself in self-forgiveness. It appears that Enright views self-forgiveness as either separate from forgiveness, or a supplement or consequence, and attempts to define it that way. He defined it as a "willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity and love toward oneself" (Enright, 1996, p. 116). As in the case of forgiving others, the self-forgiver claims the right to feelings of self-resentment for the way he or she acted in the self-offence but is willing to let go of the self-resentment. As in the case of forgiveness, self-forgiveness does not excuse behavior

nor does it overlook the behavior as in the context of a legal pardon, but it looks at the unjust behavior rationally, again privileging the cognitive.

The self-forgiver becomes aware that certain behaviors must change, all the while seeing the self as worthwhile. It was also suggested that self-forgiveness not be mistakenly construed as leading to guiltlessness and narcissism. According to Enright (1996), the opposite is the case as self-forgiveness enables acceptance of one's responsibility and pain in processing the emotions of remorse. Additionally, he claimed that self-forgiveness substantially differs from forgiveness in that self-forgiveness must also mean reconciliation with oneself, that is self-forgiveness and self-reconciliation were considered synonymous. In other words, it would be impossible to remain alienated from oneself in the experience of self-forgiveness.

Enright (1996) believed self-respect was necessary when one faced and acknowledged the seriousness of the offense in order to give oneself compassion, generosity or love. He believed that one must gain self-respect as a precursor to see the offense as a way of entering a self-forgiving journey that would eventually lead to healing. Flanigan (1996) did not concur that forgiving oneself would result in healing. She said it was more about "enormous personal growth brought about by self-examination, honesty, humility, and great personal effort" (p.xxiv). A question that arises from Flanigan's understanding is whether one is able to grow without healing, and whether that means that one always carries the wound inflicted upon oneself? It reads as if one moves, that is grows far enough away from the original wound, then one will no longer have to deal with it.

Rutledge (1997) stated that self-forgiveness and self-respect were inseparable and wrote one of the few texts outlining self-forgiveness and interventions on a self-help scale, claiming that self-forgiveness could be compared to regular maintenance on one's automobile, in so doing adopting a more reductionistic attitude. He argued against the belief that self-forgiveness was selfish and excused the individual of responsibility for his or her actions, but proposed that human growth developed internally – "...Growth moves from the inside out, and ... our repetitious, and very human, attempts to resolve problems from the outside in are...backwards" (Rutledge, 2002, p.39) – and was projected externally, so that if an individual forgives the self, the others around that person will benefit from the transfer of positive energy.

Flanigan (1996) and others (e.g. Bauer et al., 1992; Hallings, 1994a; Rowe, et al. 1989) acknowledges that self-forgiveness involves relationships at its core, defining self-forgiveness as a feeling one gets from knowing that a long-standing debt to someone has finally been paid. Understanding forgiveness in this light reinforces the notion that forgiveness is somehow earned, as the transactional equation is now finally equaled out. In forgiving oneself, the urge to self-punish that results from letting one's mistakes hurt others is extinguished, along with a commitment for personal change. She believed that when self-forgiveness was completed, one would feel more comfortable with oneself and one's place in the world, a sentiment echoed by Bauer et al. (1992). In other words, what one believes about oneself and others make sense, ideas about life are no longer troubling, and one feels more connected to one's world (Bauer et al., 1992). Her view of self-forgiveness focuses on other people, with the goal of transforming oneself into a better person for the sake of others.

Self-forgiveness has also been defined as the acceptance of those parts of oneself that have been previously assigned as unacceptable and to be altered by the person (Halling, 1994). In addition, Conran (1993) asserted that the propensity for self-forgiveness defines the inclination for admitting guilt and in turn reducing psychological defenses such as projection, denial and dissociation.

Bauer et al. (1992) took a phenomenological approach, arguing that the structure of self-forgiveness was more accurately described through the experience of forgiveness. This involved

...a shift from fundamental estrangement to being at home with one's self in the world. This at-homeness involves a change in one's identity which simultaneously feels very new and very familiar, as if recognizing for the first time someone who has always been there: that which one has avoided accepting fully about oneself, the capacity to be enraged or hurtful, for example, is acknowledged as part of who one is. One moves from an attitude of judgment to embracing who one is. This shift in identity grows out of the larger meaning the given incident has for one's life: whereas the initial distress is experienced in the context of a specific occasion or "wrongdoing," at some point there is an awareness that one is in need of forgiveness for merely being human. There is a clarity about oneself and one's place in the world, a sense of connectedness and freedom in the face of the future (p. 153).

Part of the healing offered through self-forgiveness involves an acceptance of who one is despite perceived shortcomings. It is also about giving up the robe and gavel and taking up a compassionate stance. The past remains the past but the meaning one brings to the incident remains dynamic and redefine-able. The change one accepts can raise one's awareness in the direction of Alexander Pope's (1711, <http://eserver.org/poetry/essay-on-criticism.html>) famous line in *An Essay on Criticism*,

Part 2: “to err is human (e); to forgive, divine.” Through acceptance and awareness one can find a place in the world and feel one’s belonging to humanity.

Bauer et al’s (1992) approach calls for a different method of investigating the phenomenon of self-forgiveness. The bulk of the literature laid the groundwork for the development of empirically based measurement models such as the Self Forgiveness Scale and the Self-forgiveness Model within the Forgiveness Triad (proposed by Enright, 1996.), which can be quantified linearly as though the experience of forgiveness can be reduced to Rutledge’s diagnostic check on the human mechanism. However, what appears to be missing and could supplement the literature is a “Lived Experience” framework of self-forgiveness which could help facilitate the healing process when one attempts such a journey, as Hallings (1994b) noted in his work.

In the discussion section of *Counseling within the forgiveness triad*, Enright (1996) disputes a definition offered by Andrew Vachss (1994) from a popular culture publication in that he writes:

“The final point Vachss raised is that a victim of emotional abuse only needs to forgive self. Here we see a problem with definition. That is, by definition, the emotional abuse victim was not the offender. There is quite literally nothing to self-forgive for that offense. Because self-forgiveness is tied to objective offense, the self-forgiver would be distorting reality if he or she engaged in this process” (p. 120).

It is here too, that a critical and complicating response to Enright’s definition may pose the question as to whether forgiveness begins from the point of self-forgiveness, or rather from that of abandonment and judgment. If (as might be the suggestion in Vachss’ statement) forgiveness of the other begins with self-forgiveness and/or a non-judgmental stance, it is less that, between Vachs and Enright, one is right and the other wrong, but



that they have very different understandings of self-forgiveness, and in a sense are trapped within their particular definitions. Enright admits that his model of self-forgiveness has been extrapolated from his earlier work on his models forgiving another and receiving forgiveness from another, which again reinforces that his starting point of self-forgiveness begins elsewhere and that ultimately influences his understanding of the phenomenon. However, he does allude to the speculative nature of his findings until more “research” can be done to explore more fully the complexity of self-forgiveness. He admits to the validation of his research toward the more cognitive domains, indicating again the preference towards empirically based methodologies.

In summary, the literature coheres around a number of themes. First, the psychological literature suffers from a resounding lack of research and theory about both forgiveness and self-forgiveness, although some new steps are being taken in that direction. Second, forgiveness and self-forgiveness have paradoxically been seen as either separate and distinct concepts, or as corollaries and supplements. There seem to be little consensus about how to bridge those concepts, or even if they are bridgeable and linkable. In reviewing the literature, it seems as if there is a strong suggestion for a link between forgiveness and self-forgiveness, one that it is hoped this research will elucidate and articulate. Third, there is little consensus within the literature about what forgiveness “is,” or what its structural components are, with different authors emphasizing and privileging different aspects over others. This is even more true for self-forgiveness. Fourth, the few research initiatives that exist in psychology are overwhelmingly reductionistic, seeking empirical and measurable outcomes.

This research consequently seeks to enter the gaps outlined above, hoping to build off Bauer et al's (1992) work, and help psychology fill in the gap toward an experientially based understanding of self-forgiveness. It is this author's intent to examine the following broad research questions through an interpretative phenomenological investigation into the experience of self-forgiveness. What is it that we identify as experiences of self-forgiveness? What are the features of self-forgiveness? And, what is the experience of self-forgiveness, that is, how does one experience self-forgiveness? The next chapter provides a fuller context both for these research questions, and the manner in which they are to be investigated.

### Chapter 3: Motivation, Method & Procedures

#### Motivation

Much of the reason or motivation for this study is implied and imbedded in the review of the literature. In the first instance, it is abundantly clear that very little exists in the general social science literature about forgiveness in general, and even less for self-forgiveness. Psychology, in particular, displays an acute and disturbing paucity in this regard. At the very minimum, therefore, and simply by addressing self-forgiveness and forgiveness, this dissertation adds much to a scant –some may even say threadbare – extant literature.

But of course it wants to do more: it is apparent from the literature review that there is much more that psychology can contribute. Inasmuch as this dissertation consequently aims to provide a critical and reflexive reading of the phenomenon, it promises a more complex, and rigorous academic contribution. Relatedly, in that this study is fashioned on a qualitative, hermeneutic anvil – in contrast to the dominant and prevailing quantitative experimental methods – it promises to provide a richer, more complex, understanding of self forgiveness and forgiveness. Furthermore, given this complex engagement with the issues, and the acknowledgment of the phenomenon as one that cannot be contained within a cloistered discipline, it is hoped that this dissertation will eliminate some of the artificial barriers that separate psychology from other disciplines such as religion, and spiritual studies, for example. In effect, inasmuch as the phenomenon spans disciplines, perhaps our understanding has to do so as well.

I mentioned, in Chapter 1, that my interest in the topic has been piqued and intensified by experiences in clinical and psychotherapeutic settings. I am, consequently,

confident that this dissertation will provide insights into, and suggest implications for, psychotherapy. Hopefully, it may provide a guide of sorts for bringing about a healing, all the while acknowledging the qualitative, interpretative caution in Polkinghorne's (1983) comment that "the lack of exactness and uniformity in the structures of the lifeworld means that not all judges will weigh the import of the evidence in the same way" (p. 257). Yet, if this dissertation at its barest minimum helps to normalize the feeling among other therapists that there may be something to (self) forgiveness in therapy, it would already have been worth it. Indeed, it has been mentioned often enough in the literature that forgiveness may provide a curative balm, to be applied to one's pain and suffering.

There is, though, an even more ambitious goal and desire – namely that this study may question, challenge and even change culturally received and sedimented understandings of forgiveness, admittedly one reader at a time. I believe that there is much benefit to the topic for the general manner in which it promises both to mend and to deepen connections with self and/or others. It is also my belief that self-forgiveness can heal holistically, in an integrated way, beyond just the psychological. Admittedly, this forestructure of belief, a bias to be sure, is yet to be borne out by the research results, and open to modification. Even so, however, and even if this belief is not validated in the research results, the scarce attention given to self-forgiveness in psychology, the very discipline from which I derive my professional identification, begs for an attempt to bring forgiveness to psychology, and psychology to forgiveness; to align a professional, spiritual, and personal identity – maybe not in the sense of harmonious synthesis, at least not right at the beginning, but at least in the sense of respectful conversation.

## Method

The dominant research methods within psychology continue to view phenomena from a natural scientific perspective. And, while there is much to be gleaned and learned from such methods and approaches, this study wishes to locate itself within a human science perspective. According to Polkinghorne (1983), the human science map is not diametrically opposed to the mainstream natural science map, but it marks different features of the terrain. The human science map, interpreted phenomenologically, refocuses inquiry, concentrating not on descriptions of worldly objects but descriptions of experience. Whereas, admittedly somewhat stereotypically, natural science approaches privilege empirical data and reduce human existence to quantifiable dimensions and measurable variables, a qualitative human science approach proceeds from the assumption that life experiences cannot be reduced to variables and numbers, or given to complete cognitive understanding in universal lawfulness. Indeed, it happens all too often that the experiential as a source for meaning and understanding is redacted and reduced to a prescriptive, “one-size-fits-all” model. Instead, the human science approaches attempt to render a complex understanding of the phenomenon, and to capture the rich and complex whole that is the everyday practice and context of people in ongoing social situations, thus, placing emphasis on descriptions from research subjects (Giorgi, 1985), and focusing on the subject’s experienced meaning.

There are, however, numerous approaches within the broadly human science umbrella. Narrowing the location of this study somewhat, it could be characterized as broadly hermeneutic and phenomenological. As such, the methodological starting point for the inquiry proceeds from a place delineated by the researcher’s everyday

participatory understanding of people and events (Packer & Addison, 1989). From this vantage point, understanding will come about that is both perspectival and always open to interpretation. Since understanding is always moving forward, it can be expected to change over time as others who share an interest in self-forgiveness will bring their own perspectives, borne through their experiences of culture, tradition and personal life histories, thus making the understanding of self-forgiveness open to reinterpretation.

This starting point can be thought of in terms of entering a circle of understanding, entering the hermeneutic circle, as it were. There is a circularity to understanding, as Heidegger (1927/1962) demonstrated. As such, Heideggerian (1927/1962) hermeneutics theorizes a process of projection, a forward interpretive arc. When one attempts to study some new phenomenon one is always thrown forward into it. What is meant by “thrown forward” is that unless it is completely unknown, one will have some preliminary understanding of what kind of phenomenon it is, and of what its possibilities may be. This means that one can both understand it and at the same time misunderstand it: one inevitably shapes the phenomenon to fit a “fore-structure” that has been shaped by expectations and preconceptions, and by one’s lifestyle, culture and tradition. Understanding always takes place within a framework that is “projected.” It involves an acknowledgment of the researcher’s establishing a point of view, a perspective, but also demands a reverse arc of evaluation. The forward arc makes understanding possible and the reverse arc provides the possibility for evaluating an interpretive account. The forward arc pertains specifically to where the researcher enters into the project and how his perspective will influence what s/he understands and how the narratives will be interpreted. The reverse arc is the uncovering of the phenomenon,

possibly for the first time. Hence, the circularity of understanding is that we understand in terms of what we already know. If we are persevering and open, our attention will be drawn to the projective character of our understanding and – in the backward arc, the movement of return – we gain an increased appreciation of what the fore-structure involves, and where it might be changed.

As such, and in terms of the researcher's perspective and fore-structure, self-forgiveness and forgiveness were not intuitively separate. At some level I understood them as interconnected, and that forgiveness was not primordial to self-forgiveness, but possibly the other way around as though the concepts had been seen as one looks into the mirror, in reverse. I suspected that forgiveness is intricately woven into the fabric of therapeutic processes and the healing of emotional wounds and furthermore was of the opinion that there was something about forgiveness that mainstream psychology missed, possibly as a result of the definition that it was working from, namely that the act of forgiveness begins with abandonment of anger, resentment and revenge, which would appear to favor and move away from the self and into the direction of the wrongdoer. Based on my understanding of Bauer et al.'s (1992) work, self-forgiveness appeared to involve others and thus appeared relational as well as a great amount of pain and suffering from which one would like to heal. Knowing this fore-structure as it were, the researcher tried to be careful in letting the story unfold without trying to lead or guide the direction thereof. Additionally, as mentioned before, knowledge of this forestructure allowed for its modification on the basis of the data.

However, having characterized and situated this study broadly as, and within, hermeneutic phenomenology, it is perhaps not “narrow” or circumscribed enough such

that a clear method and procedure is to be identified. Consequently, having moved from the broad human science location to a narrower hermeneutic phenomenology, this study can now be situated even more precisely within narrative inquiry, according to Polkinghorne's (1983, 1988, 1989, 1995, 1997, 2005) understanding thereof – both theoretically and methodologically.

*Polkinghorne and Ricoeur's narrative phenomenology*

Polkinghorne's (1997) theory and implications for method and procedure is based on the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984-1989). From the basic and axiomatic starting point that human beings make sense of their lives and experiences in terms of narrative, Polkinghorne, taking his cue from Ricoeur, designated three stages to the understanding of narrative structure. Firstly, "we do not experience our actions and life events as fully integrated parts of a plot; but neither are they experienced as mere disconnected fragments following one after another" (p. 38). This is considered the pre-reflective stance or life as lived before one puts together a narrative, which reveals new meaning by means of the plot (Ricoeur, 1984-1989). In this initial stage, while a person is living her or his experiences she or he is not necessarily putting together a narrative, but understanding her or his life from a reflective view. Polkinghorne says "the reflective review integrates the prenarrative understandings we had at the time of the actions and happenings with understandings that we have gained from the perspective of hindsight" (p. 38). This process of narrative configuration, a process of synthesizing one's pre-expressed, pre-languaged, pre-configured experiences, is termed emplotment.

The second stage of Polkinghorne's theoretical structure refers to the languaged self-story that is configured around a personal narrative, and involves the configuration of



“lived actions into meaningful wholes ... thereby unveil(ing) an order and coherence that did not previously appear in life as lived” (p. 43). This is where an individual explains through a personal narrative what she or he experienced, which was not understood in this way as life had been lived. In other words, the story that one lives is different from the story one tells. It is in this stage that the emplotment structure serves to transform the pre-narrative experience into a story through an interpretation and understanding of life as lived and introduces a historical context into one’s identity. This stage is more than memory recall; it “is a retrospective, interpretive composition that displays past events in the light of current understanding” which are “understood as meaningful...of their emplotted contribution to an outcome” (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 44). Polkinghorne refers to *narrative smoothing* through a process called narrative production, where one plot is made up of subplots and there is a filtering of irrelevant data and attention is given to only those elements which compose the plot. Narrative configuration is about creating meaning beyond “literally understood words through the process of figurative emplotment” (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 46). This stage allows for one to look back on his or her experience and shape it into a conceptual form that fits with the person.

The third and final stage takes the result of narrative configuration - the narrative emplotment - and refigures it. This involves one’s reception of one’s own narrative and how that will impact and influence the person, incorporating his or her story and what that now means as far as one identifies oneself. By accepting this reconfiguration, one must now ‘live up to the standard’ one now sees oneself, as Polkinghorne (1997) states, the personal narrative “re-configures who one is to be, and calls people to actualize the possibilities the story holds for their existence” (pp. 46-47). In addition, as one accepts

his or her story one may gain sensitivity and insight into the limits and possibilities of one's actions.

This theoretical structure highlights the temporality of one's existence. As people change physiologically and cognitively over time, so will their narratives, again alluding to the hermeneutic umbrella that holds sway over this theoretical structure. One's way of understanding one's story will change over time.

The methodology follows from the theory, such that particular attention is paid to the manner in which languaged data are gathered and organized into narrative. As such, the manner in which subjects narrativize their life-experiences, and in this case particularly the experience(s) of self-forgiveness, accords well with this study's desire to ground understanding in the lived experiential. In the words of Schwandt (2001, p. 84), "Qualitative inquiry deals with human lived experience. It is the *life-world* as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study". A primary purpose of such qualitative research is consequently to describe and clarify experiences as they are lived and constituted in awareness. Human experience is difficult to study as it is multilayered and complex, and unlike the objects of nature, the layers of human experience are not rigidly ordered, nor are its moving contents related to mathematical patterns – another reason why natural science methods may not be the best fit for the study of such experience.

Yet, while people have access to their own experiences, these experiences are not available for public view. As illustrated above, the data, in a very real sense, represent a languaged narrative about the experience, removed from the actual experience in its "happening" or direct access. People resort to stories to describe human action; events

and actions are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot, and “narrative refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Plot is the narrative structure through which people understand and describe the relationship among events and choices of their lives. Plot is the thematic thread that lays out happenings as parts of an unfolding movement that culminates in an outcome. What links the “parts” together (emplotment) gives rise to a narrative meaning, that is, the happenings are understood from the perspective of their contribution and influence on the outcome (Polkinghorne, 1995). As I illustrate and elucidate below, plot and subplot (and the processes of emplotment) consequently has to be a particular methodological and procedural focus of the study.

If, therefore, the narrative is the basic figuration that produces the human experience of one’s life and action and that of others, I have to pay close attention to what people tell me about their experiences with forgiveness and self-forgiveness, in all its complexity, and to render from those narratives, a narrative meaning structure that involves emplotment, narrative configuration, and narrative meaning-making vis-à-vis the phenomenon. However, it is not enough to simply listen to the story in order to simply chart the stages of narrative meaning-making, but to create a warm, respectful, collaborative relationship with the research participants such that they could tell their stories, and feel respectfully attended to, in the first place.

After collecting the interviews, I dwelled with, and in, the interview recording and transcripts listening firstly for a chronology of plot; at its basic level, I wanted to get the participants’ stories straight. Hereafter, I paid closer attention to the tense points in the story, those moments that move from predicament through response to resolution in such

a way as to reveal hidden aspects of character and situation. Plots represent an activity in which temporal happenings are shaped into meaningful expressions, representing what events have meant to the research participant (Polkinghorne, 1997). Care was exercised not to lose sight of the participant's perspective. This was done by engaging with the interview transcripts as an unfolding drama, remaining open to surprises and holding onto the awareness that the researcher may learn something that the participants did not discover until after, if at all. The process involved detection, selection and interpretation of the data, to be sure, but it remained my intention to accurately represent the narratives as "temporal connections between the events they have experienced and how they accounted for their own motives, reasons, expectations, and memories" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 170).

In addition, the stories people tell, and the sense of these stories as lived, involve a thorough sensitivity to the cultural, biological, historical and individual which Polkinghorne (1995) organizes around seven guidelines, to wit: (1) Descriptions of the cultural context in which the narrative takes place. The participant has incorporated the values, social rules and meanings systems of the culture in which he or she developed, and particular meanings of happenings and actions are prescribed by the cultural heritage. Each participant has made assumptions about acceptable and expected personal goals based on societal cues. Care will be taken to explain the contextual features that give specific meanings to events to understand their contribution to the plot; (2) The embodied nature of narrative - people's emotional responses to events and others are bodily, and the body places temporal limits on life, the recognition of which must be given to research articulation; (3) An explanation of the significant relationships in the participant's

narrative. An explanation of the relationships between the participant and other people is required in the development of the plot. The reasons for undertaking actions are often related to concern for another's happiness, not to satisfy one's own needs; (4) The choices and actions of the participant and how it effected the outcome toward self-forgiveness. To assist in understanding the participant, each one's meanings and understandings, vision of the world, and his or her plans, purposes, motivations, and interests will be discussed; (5) The historical continuity in the development of each story. Every effort will be made to present the participant as consistent with past experiences from making each one's decisions and actions understandable and sensible. Although a participant's past experience persevere into the present, it will be presumed that each person's struggle has been to change habitual behaviors and to act differently; (6) Each narrative occurs in a bounded temporal period, with a beginning, middle and end. The story will focus on a specific context in which the plot takes place. Each participant will be presented as a distinctive individual, in a unique situation, dealing with issues in a personal manner; (7) The researcher will provide an understanding of self-forgiveness that serves to configure the separate narratives into a meaningful explanation based on the responses and actions of the participants. The configuration process will begin with the participant's conclusion, that of having forgiven her or himself. The researcher will retrospectively view the data elements in order to link them into a framework for understanding self-forgiveness that led to this outcome for each.

Interpretation is therefore seen as a way of working out the possibilities projected in the understanding of self-forgiveness, showing self-forgiveness in a new light. The idea is to show self-forgiveness in a way that does not force the researcher's perspective

on it, respecting the way self-forgiveness shows itself as experienced in the lives of the participants. In terms of validation, I paid particular attention to *four approaches* or stances. The first involves *external evidence*, which meant going back to the participant to ask if my interpretation demonstrated an understanding of what he or she meant. This meant talking with each participant two to three times, initially to gather the story (data) and thereafter to determine how well the researcher captured the meaning of the story. The second stance involved the *participant's interpretation*; how does the participant view their understanding of self-forgiveness. The third stance involved *consensus*. In order for the interpretation to be convincing, it should be communicable to others, should make sense to them, and enable them to interpret new meanings as a result. The final consideration involved the *practical implications*, examining the relationship between an interpretation of the experience of self-forgiveness and how others follow from its footsteps. It is the researcher's contention that by following these approaches through the interpretation provided and illuminated a novel understanding of self-forgiveness.

In summary, the analysis of the data took as its primary focus the manner in which the participants made sense of their stories in terms of plot, including the processes whereby this plot comes to assume meaning and inform action. This means that the researcher has to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data without losing the sense thereof as the participants' stories. In the attention to narrative, however, it is also true that some aspects of plot and emplotment in participants' stories be ignored or in that the researcher select a bounded system for study. Put another way, there is a supplementarity of meaning, and the researcher focuses on a particular aspect of participants' lives, in this case, the experience of self-

forgiveness. Hence, there is much more to the interviews, but I only listened for the manner in which self-forgiveness is lived and understood; that is the narrative question posed to the text, and data which relate to this particular systemic question or interest are sought. Narrative analysis is the procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account. Participant interviews constitute the evidential data for this study (of course with due regard for the fact that the evidence is not the marks on the paper, per se, but the meanings represented therein).

### Procedure

It was the intent of this research project to obtain research participants that would represent a diverse pool of experiences involving an act of self-forgiveness.

Polkinghorne (2005) stated that participants for a qualitative study should be selected because they can provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation. After approval for the study had been granted by the Institutional Review Board of Duquesne University, several settings were explored in order to solicit possible research subjects. For example, the researcher spoke to a minister from a Presbyterian Church to request that she make an announcement to her congregation regarding interest in participating in the study; the researcher approached professional colleagues in the health care field to solicit volunteers and who might have an interest in being part of the research; the researcher also approached a fellow classmate and former supervisor to request that she also make an announcement regarding interest in participating in the study to a group of clients currently in her care.

Research volunteers were solicited from those sites identified above. Prospective participants were queried as to the nature of their experience to determine whether they met criteria for inclusion into the study (inclusion criteria are listed in the section below). Great care had been taken to protect the identities of the participants and confidentiality of their interviews, and in reporting on the results, participants are referred to by pseudonym. Participants were required to sign an informed consent agreement (Appendix I), within which the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures were stated; their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun was noted; whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights were clearly listed. Based on the methods employed by the researcher, the participants were given the opportunity to learn about the results and conclusions drawn and collaborated in correcting any misconceptions. The researcher was careful to follow the APA Code of Conduct regarding confidentiality and ethical principles regarding human subjects in research. The researcher remained emotionally present in the telling of the stories as they were at times tearfully revealed by all the participants. The consent agreement stated that a transcriber was going to be employed to transcribe the conversations. In the end, however, it was decided that I would transcribe the audiotapes myself.

The procedure for transcribing the audiotapes was identical for all three interviews. Within a day or two of the meeting, the tapes were transcribed and checked (twice) for accuracy.



### *Selection of Participants*

According to Polkinghorne (2005), because the focus of qualitative research differs from the focus of the natural sciences, it requires a set of principles for the selection of data sources. The focus of qualitative research is on describing, understanding, and clarifying human experiences. Qualitative research requires collecting groups of intense, packed, and saturated descriptions of the experience under investigation.

Polkinghorne adds that due to the goal of qualitative research of enriching the understanding of an experience, it needs to select fertile models of the experience to be studied. He emphasized that “such selections are purposeful and sought out; the selection should not be random or left to chance” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140). Thus, the selection of participants was intentional and purposeful, as Polkinghorne had suggested. Participants were included in the study if they: (a) were eighteen years or older, (b) gave consent to be in the study, (c) were willing to answer basic questions about self-forgiveness and share their story, (d) could identify that their story involved the completion of a journey of self-forgiveness, (e) were able to speak and understand English, and (f) from Polkinghorne (2005) could adequately reflect on her/his experience and verbally describe it.

I received a total of 26 inquiries regarding the study. The majority of those interested responded to notices that were posted in public venues, such as bulletin boards at a church and one mental health service provider. I experienced a steady stream of calls over a two-week period after the notices were posted and some thereafter.

Most people seemed to be genuinely interested and concerned with my research and the topic. Yet, some respondents were eliminated after the expectations of participation were shared: some were just interested in seeking information, and some did not want to participate in the study, but wanted a copy of the results (including two people who identified themselves as physicians). Five individuals responded that they felt they were still struggling with the issues and were hoping that it might be helpful for them to process their stories, while two individuals were seeking compensation for their participation in the study, and two others directly requested therapy in exchange for their participation. One individual identified her age as less than 18 years old and was not considered for the study. In the end, six people were identified as candidates for the study. Two, however, responded rather late in the process, and a third was in the midst of some significant life changes. Consequently, those three respondents were “put on reserve”, so to speak, and by agreement with them, would be used if the other three candidates withdrew from the study, or their data could not be used for some or other reason.

Three participants were consequently selected, a woman of 49 years old, married, and the mother of two adolescent boys. This participant individual was given the pseudonym of Lois and was recruited from a notice posted on the church bulletin board where she attends services. The second person was given the pseudonym of Max and was also recruited from a notice on the bulletin board of his church, albeit a different church from the first participant. Max is 78 years old and lives with his spouse. They had recently relocated back to the Pittsburgh area, where they originated from, to be closer to family. The third and final candidate, given the pseudonym Joyce, is a woman

in her early forties, and was recruited from a notice in the common area where she was employed. She is the mother of a thirteen year-old daughter.

To support the use of choosing three participants, the researcher followed Polkinghorne's argument that stated:

“Qualitative researchers most often use a small number of participants in their studies. The reason for the use of multiple participants is to provide accounts from different perspectives about an experience. By comparing and contrasting these perspectives, researchers are able to notice the essential aspects that appear across the sources and to recognize variations in how the experience appears. In this sense, multiple participants serve as a kind of triangulation on the experience, locating its core meaning by approaching it through different accounts. Triangulation does not serve to verify a particular account but to allow the researcher to move beyond a single view of the experience. The use of multiple participants serves to deepen the understanding of the investigated experience; it is not for the purpose of making claims about the distribution of the experience in a population” (Polkinghorne, 2005 p. 140)

The three participants chosen for the study provided the depth and diversity that Polkinghorne alluded toward and provided the researcher the opportunity to expand one's understanding of self-forgiveness.

After going through the preliminaries of the study by telephone, an interview was scheduled with each participant. Interview participants were informed of their rights and the research safeguards for their protection. Research participation was voluntary, and each participant was informed of his or her right to decline participation, or withdraw from the study at any time. Written consent was obtained during the first person-to-person interview. Participants were also told they could refuse to answer questions and/or request the audiotape be stopped at any time. Each participant was told that her/his identity would be kept confidential and that s/he would not be identified in the study.

The researcher explained that each interview was audio taped for the purposes of transcription, but that interviewees' privacy would be respected in that they would never be identified by name, and that all transcribed records, audiotapes and computer disks were to be securely stored for a period of five years, after which the records would be safely destroyed and disposed of.

I allotted two hours for each interview, even as the actual interview times varied in length, from an hour to one and a half hours. Without exception, each candidate had requested the venue that was personally known to him or her. Two interviews were conducted in participant's homes and one was conducted in the participant's office. Participants were informed, beforehand, that it would be important to conduct the interview in a space free of undue distraction. The two home interviews were conducted at the dining room table with no one present in adjoining rooms. All three participants had tearful moments. All three indicated either through verbal or physical gestures that the experience of telling their story was emotionally and physically draining. I felt compelled to translate the initial interviews within days following in order to stay focused and attuned with the emotions the participants had shared and expressed.

The data collected was analyzed according to Polkinghorne's (1995) notion of emplotment, which is the plot's integrating operation of each participant's narrative and guiding techniques described by Colaizzi (1978). The first step in the analysis involved transcribing the interviews; hereafter I read through each transcript in its entirety to get a sense of the whole and let the stories "sit with me"; I returned to each interview transcript later, read it through again, this time noting initial narrative themes, plots, and subplots; after a while, I returned to the interview transcripts again, fleshing out my initial thematic

notations, adding or modifying what I already had, and examining statements for the accuracy of their characterization; I then proceeded to devise an initial structural description of the phenomenon, from each interview individually, and in comparison or alongside each other. Exceptions were noted alongside integrating and synthesizing statements, all of which were incorporated into a narrative hermeneutic. This hermeneutic was revisited several times. Each participant had been visited a minimum of two times to discuss the findings and seek clarification. Without exception, each participant had agreed with the findings and stated their desire to receive a copy of the completed study. After each subsequent meeting, I was invited back should I need further clarification.

*Reflections on the Process of the Procedure for Transcribing the Narratives*

One aspect of this project that I had not anticipated fully was how emotionally draining the telling of one's story of self-forgiveness can be and had been for the participants. I left each interview with an excited anticipation to transcribe the conversations and read what I had just experienced. It is interesting to note the stark difference between summarizing a conversation one has just had to actually reading what one has experienced. Replaying the tape for the transcription process, when not taking multiple breaks trying to capture a word that is not clear on the tape, had the feeling of reliving the moment at times. The transcriptions were completed within three days of each interview.

The transcription process felt mechanistic due to the methodology employed to convert the spoken word as captured on an audiotape to the written word. In that only a few seconds of the tape could be listened to at a time in order to capture the words

spoken, there were glimpses of recollection in the telling of the story as heard in this way, but this process did not allow for a fluid unfolding of the narrative. Instead, it was choppy and at times incomprehensible when taken out of the context of the entire conversation. I did not take time to dwell in the interviews until after the transcripts were made. Extra effort was made to ensure that the transcriptions were completed within a day or two following the interviews. I felt it was important to have access to the transcripts as soon as possible to allow for a fuller, deeper and more lasting impression of the experience. At the completion of the process, as I read the transcripts, I imagined the participants speaking the words written on the page. I wonder what it will sound like to anyone reading the transcripts, not knowing who the person is speaking. There is a feeling that permeated my experience that is extremely difficult to capture in words but it is how I hear the words as I read them from the transcripts.

The chapter that follows reports on the interpretative results, and it makes sense to remind the reader, again, of the broad research questions that were posed to the text; those questions, the responses to which were analyzed in terms of narrative reflection, emplotment, and reconfiguration. What is it that we identify as experiences of self-forgiveness? What are the features of self-forgiveness? What is the experience of self-forgiveness, that is, how does one experience self-forgiveness?

### Chapter 4: Results

This section presents the results of the analysis. Taking the methodological guidelines of Polkinghorne (1988) into serious account, I've organized the data in terms of preliminary narrative plot, tense points, and narrative characters, all of which point to the processes of reflexive narrative configuration, emplotment, and reconfiguration. Additionally, each section provides an introduction to the participant and how it is that s/he came to be a participant in the study as well as where the interview took place. A description of the interview location and my reactions to meeting the participants for the first time comes next, followed by the participant's definition of self-forgiveness and then by a description of the plot of each person's journey toward self-forgiveness. The main characters will be discussed, along with the tense moments experienced in the telling of the narratives. A general framework of the process of self-forgiveness is teased out and the themes and subplots summarized. These plots, toward the end of the chapter, become the material for a narrative phenomenology of self-forgiveness, discussed in greater detail in the chapter that follows (Chapter 5).

As I started to review the transcripts in this phase of my project (interview transcriptions for each subject are provided in appendices II through IV), I realized that it was difficult to be analytically reflective in the moment. This not only because the focus, during the interview, was to be as empathically present as I could be, but also because other concerns intruded and occupied my attention at various times and levels of intensity. For example, after my first interview with Lois, I transcribed the conversation the next day. Early in the transcription process, the cassette player, which I had purchased for the project, had become erratic and almost failed to operate. With much

manipulation and frustration, I was able to retrieve the conversation. I had decided that the project was far too important to be compromised by faulty equipment so I decided to return it and obtain a replacement. In a way, the technology became an issue of concern that remained with me for the duration of the data collection process. Another example of technology raising my anxiety level came at the second participant's home. The interview was conducted in the dining room, which was adjacent to the kitchen. The participant decided to run the dishwasher during our interview since we had met after dinner and his wife was going out for the evening. I became concerned over the background noise as the dishwashing machine was very loud and could be overheard on the tape during playback. Even though I had been careful to run a test loop before starting each interview, the dishwashing machine's noise level steadily increased as it progressed through the various cycles. Another concern I had involved the cassettes, and even though I had not had a problem with them for this project as I had purchased a reputable brand, my personal experience with audiocassettes in the past had been where the tape failed and was ultimately destroyed. While I was aware of these distractions, I did not let them interfere with the interviews but certainly felt hindered to be more reflective in the moment.

I remember driving home after each initial interview feeling humbled and honored by the experience of having heard these courageous stories. I was particularly struck by my first participant's interview. Lois had cried through most of the interview and she had indicated that she was truly surprised by her reaction. As I listened, I had a sense that she was healing and that it was something she needed to do. At some level, I felt empathy for her sadness as it evoked the memory of a loss I had recently experienced



within my family. I believe those tears are part of the grieving process and very much necessary in order for us to heal and come to peace with our loss. It is not about 'getting over' the loss, as our society and culture seem to communicate, but our way of integrating and discovering a new way to intimate that former relationship.

Another way I felt humbled by the experiences is that I really believed I understood the choices each participant had made and realized that anyone could make the same ones, given the same experiences that led up to their decision to act. It really highlighted for me our way of being connected to each other and others. We are all capable of making similar choices and reacting much in the same manner and we do not need to judge each other but finds ways in which we express our love and support to those who are willing to share such an intimate part of their lives.

I tried to remain keenly sensitive to the manner in which these observations, biases, and preoccupations may have entered (or threatened to enter) the analysis, remembering throughout to focus on the participant's story, even as my own issues could not be wholly kept outside of the enterprise.

Interview with Lois (The transcript of this interview is attached as Appendix II):

At the time of our interview, Lois was a married mother of two adolescent males. When I first spoke to her via the telephone, she described herself as a stay-at-home mother and had responded to my notice as posted on the fellowship hall bulletin board of her church. She said she was not sure how it could help, but she felt her story met my requirement and she wanted to share it. Lois requested that we meet at her home as she explained that while she did not think she would get emotional, she wanted to be in the

comfort and safety of her own surroundings if she did. The interview was held in the dining room and her young sons could be overheard in the distance playing video games and watching television.

Lois was very hospitable and I instantly felt at home. She offered me something to eat and drink and wanted to know my interests in researching the topic of self-forgiveness. Her home was warm and inviting. I had commented on how nicely decorated her house was and she admitted that she had always wanted to work as an interior designer but never felt she had the talent for such a pursuit. She introduced me to her sons and husband and showed me around the first floor of their home. We settled in the dining room, which she had recently painted and wallpapered. The furniture was oak and looked brand new. The room was tastefully adorned and neatly arranged. We sat across from each other at the end of the table.

When I first arrived, I felt the urge to jump right in and get down to business and quickly realized that it would not be conducive to establishing a trusting rapport. I was able to adjust my style to a more casual and relaxed way of interacting and did not feel pressured to start the interview until I had a sense that Lois was ready to begin. I appreciated the way she invited me into her home and thanked her for being so considerate. When we finally settled into our high back chairs in the dining room, I introduced the consent form and placed the recorder on the table. After Lois provided me with her signature I initiated a test loop on the tape to insure the machine was working properly. I proceeded to ask Lois how she defined self-forgiveness.

### *Self-forgiveness defined*

Lois stated that self-forgiveness meant “being able to live with something that really bothered you for a long time and really be able to put it to rest and not worry about it anymore...” Her definition seemed short and to the point. The wording of “live with something” in the context of her sentence alludes to an action or choice that she made that she had regretted and that had caused her considerable anguish. There is a temporal dimension to her definition of self-forgiveness in that it spans from the past into the present, that is “for a long time”, and reaches into the future in that her struggles had been with her for many days, suggested by her use of the words “not worry about it anymore”. The assumption here is that she had not been able to free herself of it, thus living it today and the days that followed. Her use of the words “put it to rest” hints that part of the journey may include a grieving process in which there is a loss and an ultimate coming to peace with what has happened.

### *Plot*

The plot of Lois’ story involved breaking a promise to her older sister while she (her older sister) lay dying of cancer in the hospital. This validates the assumption that Lois had alluded to – a choice or action – in her definition of self-forgiveness when she said “live with something”. The “something” was a broken promise that came about based on her actions. Lois had promised her sister that she would never leave her to be alone while she was in the hospital because her sister had confessed to her how scared she had been. After many weeks of visiting her sister each night in the hospital after a full day’s work, Lois made a decision the night before her sister died to stay at home and rest rather than go see her. She was going into work later the next day and thought she

could see her sister in the morning before work. However, before she could get to the hospital, her sister passed away. No one had been with her when she took her last breath, including her sister's mother-in-law who had been living in the hospital with her sister. Lois felt she abandoned her sister in her time of need and did not know if she suffered before breathing her last breath that morning. It was not until many years later, after Lois had children of her own, that she reports being able to start forgiving herself for not being with her sister when she died.

### *Main characters*

The main characters of Lois' story involved herself and her sister whom she had loved dearly. This was evidenced by the intense emotions Lois displayed in recalling her story. Lois repeatedly called her sister by name and had the utmost respect for her and how she raised her family. As she said her sister's name repeatedly in the interview, it was as if her sister was still a very present part of Lois' life. In fact, Lois referenced that her sister was more intimately involved in her life as she (Lois) believed her sister had been trying to teach her all along to become a loving and caring mother. Lois said, "how she raised her kids there was just something, she was helping me even though she wasn't here. I just felt that she was helping me by the way she handled her children. And now I can understand...and so it just seemed like she wasn't here but I was learning from her..." Central to the essence of these two sisters and at its core is their relationship. So much so that the breaking of her promise to her sister – a rupture to the relationship – was at the heart of the plot and created the tensive point around, or impetus toward, the path of self-forgiveness. Even though Lois could no longer have a physical relationship with

her sister, she reports feeling a spiritual connection/relationship with her sister.

Replacing the loss endured by the physical relationship with her sister, Lois ensured that she maintained relationships with her sister's children, who became more central in her story as she worked toward healing herself and accepting her decision.

Her sister's children, along with her own children, emerge as secondary but nonetheless central characters as she emplots her story and forges meaningful relations between the parts of the story in reflection. Lois identified the birth of her children as part of the self-forgiveness journey. She said, "...when I had children...I could relate to how she felt about her children...I think I could compare some of the things she was trying to tell me to the things that I was feeling." Lois would become a partial and integral caregiver to her sister's children as they matured through their lives. She would try to help fill in the gaps about their mother whenever the opportunity presented itself. For example, Lois said, "the youngest for instance, never knew her Mom well. The only way she remembers her is as bald and real frail. We were going through photo albums one day and she said, "Who's this?" It was my sister and she just didn't recognize her and so I was able and have been able to help them with those sorts of things. Maybe I understand now is what my job is – for her kids to be here to help them." In this way, Lois has found a way to intimate the relationship with her sister through the relationship Lois has with her sister's children.

Other characters central to Lois' story of self-forgiveness involved those with whom she had an emotional connection. God emerged as a central character in her journey as someone she needed in order to help her forgive. It could be argued that Lois' journey of self-forgiveness also included forgiveness of God for taking her sister away.

Initially she was angry with God saying, “there were a lot of times...I would holler at God, I would talk to him and I would get mad and ask him why? Why? Why?” Lois would eventually come to peace with God and strengthen her faith in the process. Stating that she had been able, through her faith, to make peace with God and find gratitude, Lois states that now, “when I think about it I do kind of thank God...”

### *Tensive moments*

The tensive moments of Lois’ story were accentuated by her tears and were clearly emotionally laden moments. Specifically, this first came across when she stated “I was not with my sister when she died”. She had prefaced these words by saying that she hoped she would not cry when she told her story. As I mentioned earlier, I did not experience these moments as awkward but humbling in that Lois had the courage to share her feelings openly with me and for the benefit of all who will be exposed to this study. I felt more fully present as I could share in her sadness.

Another moment was when she had come to the realization that it was “ok” for her not to be there, a giving of permission to herself to excuse her presence and/or her “failing”. I watched intently as Lois worked hard to grant herself permission; it was like watching a movie and really identifying with the struggles of the main character. It was in moments such as these that I felt my role as a researcher and how different it was from being a therapist. I had to quiet the urge to comment and let the story unfold without trying to influence its direction.

Another moment is when a memory of her sister would come flooding back, like the reminder of her sister's daughter having children of her own and her sister not being

there for her daughter. Lois' faith was called into question and she would get angry with God – "I would holler at God...I would get mad and ask him why, why, why"? This moment stood out because of her struggle and tension with accepting her sister's death through her faith and how she learned to come to peace with the fact that her sister was no longer alive.

The telling of the story was emotional from the beginning. The intensity of emotions ebbed and flowed but there was a strong emotional current that flowed throughout. As in Lois' opening comment about not crying, and then the bursting forth of tears when she confessed that she was not there with her sister, - Lois' story was sad but did not leave me feeling that way in the end. As she told her story, it was like an imbalance until she was able to forgive herself. There was a feeling of victory – but not necessarily a celebratory one – in coming from where she was to where she is now. I was pleasantly surprised in knowing that I shared in her sadness as I sat there listening to her story face-to-face and could still share in her sadness as I transcribed and heard her voice once again. I felt fortunate, as I had experienced Lois to be emotionally present and engaged throughout the interview process.

*A framework for understanding self-forgiveness (Lois' emplotted narrative structure)*

Lois' journey of self-forgiveness did not begin until – she says – she was willing to stop punishing herself and grant herself permission to accept a different point of view. Lois was unable to avoid or deny that she was not healing and that there must be something wrong. Lois felt estranged from herself and others, which was deeply painful. She felt she had to punish herself for many years, a period that also coincided with a

feeling of anger toward God, her sister, as well as herself. Punishment would take the form of self-blame and distorting cognitively that she could have controlled what happened to her sister; the proverbial – *if only I had been there*. She remained closed and cutoff from support and found herself isolating and alienating, unable and unwilling to accept what had happened. This was highlighted when she said, “Earlier on, there was no acceptance, there was no reason, I couldn’t understand why she even had to die, why she had to go through what she had to go through. I just couldn’t grasp it.” She experienced intense feelings of self-recrimination as she cognitively rehearsed her absence at her sister’s passing. Wracked with confusion as to why her sister died when she did, coupled with guilt over breaking her promise, and anxiety as she imagined the pain her sister must have felt before dying, Lois also noted despair over not being able to relive the decision of not seeing her the night before she left this world physically. These feelings left Lois weak and vulnerable. Trying to handle the situation herself, Lois found that she was powerless to get beyond it or to “come to peace” with it. She struggled not only with her feelings of grief for her sister’s loss, but also the grief around the person she believed herself to be, namely one that was as good as her word, but who at the same time broke an important and fundamental promise. Lois felt a deep sense of emptiness from losing the relationship with her sister, sadness over her death and intense loneliness fueled by her own betrayal of her word. She directed the anger she felt at God, as evidenced by her coming home to “holler” at him, but she was also angry with her sister and herself. Lois was unable to stop the self-recrimination and continued to beat herself up for many, many years.



As Lois allowed herself permission to heal through self-forgiveness she experienced times when she could accept what had happened and how she responded – to harsh judgment. Initially, Lois began to dialogue with friends and family but only in that she needed to let her voice be heard. She reported not being receptive to hearing another's point of view. The analogy would be that of a radio where one can only transmit and not be able to receive. Most likely she could not accept what she had done and therefore could not accept anyone accepting her for what she had done. However, with time she was able to heal through accepting what others had to say. In essence, the healing began when self-forgiveness became relational and involved more than the self. Eventually, Lois found comfort in her husband as someone who had been able to lovingly accept her without judging her and helped her work through her feelings of anger, self-hatred, mistakes, hurtfulness, alienation and her perceived irresponsibility. Lois challenged her faith and belief in God that He would provide her with the healing she was seeking, to bring about a mending to her feelings of brokenness. Even though she lost her faith in God, she continued to believe in Him, albeit judging Him on human terms – *how could you let this happen this way?* Lois would identify the birth of her children as a moment of “grace” to help her bring about a new understanding of her relationship with her sister and how she had worked hard to prepare her for motherhood. She realized she could help her sister's children as a way to honor and respect her sister's life and brought about a sense of peace as a way to keep her word to her sister through her sister's children. As she embraced motherhood, she was able to begin to let go of seeing herself as not being trustworthy and the belief at the time that she could never heal. Lois was able to start accepting herself and lessened the self-recrimination and anguish she felt

about being in the world. The acceptance of self she began to feel at that time allowed her to develop intimate bonds with her children and her sister's children as well. As Lois began to accept herself more and more, she was able to participate more fully in her life and spent less time analyzing what she had not done. Lois described her path as circuitous and not linear in that she imagined this journey to be life long.

Themes in the Plots and Subplots of self-forgiveness:

1. An irreversible choice has been made involving a loved one. Lois made a choice to satisfy her own needs, the consequence of which was a perceived abrogation of her sister's needs.
2. The choice affected Lois comprehensively, in all aspects of her being – emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, and interpersonally.
3. There was a profound sense of loss.
4. Even though self-forgiveness implies one by virtue of the word “self”, it is relational.
5. It can take many years before one gets to a sense of having moved beyond the reproach, sadness, guilt, and other feelings associated with the decision.
6. Attaining a sense of self-forgiveness involves grieving and mourning.
7. Anger is involved in the process: angry with oneself for making a choice that violates a promise one has made to another, anger with God for taking a loved one away
8. The facts do not change but the meaning the facts hold changes. Self-forgiveness allows for a new plot and narrative of self and other to emerge.

9. The process/journey does not have an endpoint, but is continuous.

*Researcher reactions to/during the interview*

Early in Lois' story, I remember being reminded of a book written by Mitch Albom – *Tuesday's with Morrie* (1997). It is the true story of television sports personality Mitch Albom's relationship with a former professor he had in college after he learned that the professor [Morrie] was dying of cancer. In that book, Albom (1997) stated that he believed a person could determine when s/he would take her/his last breath. He believed that Morrie had decided to take his last breath at the precise moment when Morrie's family had exited the room, possibly that they would remember him as he had been, leaving them with a lasting memory of his vitality. Albom writes:

Finally, on the fourth of November, when those he loved had left the room for just a moment – to grab coffee in the kitchen, the first time none of them were with him since the coma began – Morrie stopped breathing...And he was gone...I believe he died this way on purpose...I believe he wanted...no one to witness his last breath and be haunted by it (p.187).

Moreover, as Lois narrated her story, I recalled standing beside my mother, witnessing my father take his last breath in the hospital nine months earlier. He took his last breath only after my sister, who was best friends with him, had exited the room to get a drink of water. Later, I wondered if Lois would have been comforted to know how others thought around this sensitive subject and if it would have helped her along in her journey to heal from not being with her sister, even though her sister's mother-in-law had made arrangements to stay with her sister round the clock? As Lois said, "even though her mother-in-law was there that morning, she had stepped out to get coffee and in that amount of time she died". Possibly, Lois could accept - as Albom had suggested - that a

person could choose the moment of her last breath. Perhaps, I speculated, Lois had been struggling with accepting this idea when she said, “I’ve learned that sometimes people hang on because you are there, maybe that was her opportunity to leave because she needed to and if we weren’t always there she would have gone sooner... that maybe it was her way of leaving with nobody there...” In a follow up meeting with Lois, she did confirm my hypothesis and accepted my suggestion of reading Albom’s book.

Another aspect of Lois’ story that stood out for me immediately was the relationship of God in the whole process, especially her initial anger at God. In fact, I was so interested in this aspect that I met with Father Mike of a Monastery Retreat in Mount Washington, Pennsylvania to further discuss the issue of anger in self-forgiveness from a theological perspective. Father Mike explained that he provided counseling specifically to those who sought him out when seeking to self-forgive, and that he is of the opinion that one of the most difficult parts of the journey involves anger at God. He noticed how people struggle with the idea that on one hand they are supposed to love God and on the other that they are so angry with him. These conflicted emotions were often difficult for individuals to reconcile. Father Mike stated that his belief was that in order for a journey of self-forgiveness to continue, one must forgive God. Making the analogy of the relationship a parent has with a child, Father Mike said that a parent could be angry with their child and still love her/him. Just because one is angry with another does not mean that s/he can no longer love them but one must find a way to work through the anger. In fact, as we learn to work through our anger in healthy ways in our relationships the added benefit is that we become closer, building a stronger, intimate bond with the other.

At one time, reflecting on the particularly emotional points of the interview when Lois was visibly upset and teary, I had this image of being at the ocean and watching the waves crash to shore and then recede back until all is calm for a few moments.

Afterwards, I had an esoterically appealing sense of that image and the experience, which reminded me that power and peace could move in harmony with one another. I came to a sense that, in our culture, there is a tendency to say that “someone is losing it” whenever there is an outward display of tears, but I felt that Lois’ emotional response to the telling of story was every bit a part of the story as her words had been – in fact, perhaps resolute turning and/or healing points in the narrative.

Interview with Max (The transcript of this interview is attached as Appendix III):

At the time of our interview, Max was a retired businessman living with his spouse in a retirement home. He responded to my notice as posted on a bulletin board in his church. Max said he had a story to tell that would fit my request and he wanted to be able to help others from his experience. He requested that I meet him at his home because he had difficulty getting around and he did not like to drive if he could avoid it. The interview was held at the dining room table in his apartment and we were alone, as his wife had stepped out for the evening.

I met Max and his spouse at their home nestled in a scenic and quiet retirement village. Their apartment was clean and tastefully decorated. The art on their walls depicted serene images of contentment and solitude. One wall was dedicated to family photos over the years, including one of their wedding pictures. Like Lois, Max’s spouse offered me something to eat and drink. He and his spouse were cleaning up the kitchen

after my arrival and apologized for the inconvenience. Max cleared the dining room table of newspapers, the last remaining dishes and helped his spouse finish loading the dishwasher. Max, almost whispering, relayed that his spouse had suffered a stroke a few years back and needed his help with many of the day-to-day domestic chores. I instantly felt at home and offered assistance that was appreciated, but declined. Max made small talk about sports and the weather and placed a glass of water on the table for each of us.

Max was very friendly and personable and struck me as someone whom it was easy to take an instant liking toward. He reminded me of a father figure and someone whom you would like to be friends with. He was quick to smile and showed concern over my comfort. After attending to the necessary chores, kissing his wife goodbye for the evening, he invited me to sit at the head of the dining room table with him taking the side seat closest to me. The lighting was exceptionally bright and I could feel the heat from the recessed spotlights above. I introduced the consent form to Max and he excused himself to retrieve his reading glasses. When he returned I proceeded to discuss the form and he readily affixed his signature. I initiated a test loop on the recorder and Max apologized for the dishwasher, telling me he tries to run it when his wife is away because the noise is irritating to her. I placed the recorder close to Max fearful of the background noise interfering with our conversation and proceeded to ask him his definition of self-forgiveness.

#### *Self-forgiveness defined*

Max stated “that self-forgiveness becomes present...after you feel that you have treated someone poorly and maybe you shouldn’t have...after a while you feel there is no hope for making amends and you somehow or other you have to forgive yourself seeing

or doing some things that you did that you felt that you did in the past that you shouldn't have done." A basic tenet for self-forgiveness that emerged seems to involve a choice one makes in relation toward another that leaves one feeling anxious and regretful for having acted on that choice, a self-judging and ultimate condemnation. There appears to be a fixed understanding or allowance for only one interpretation – "there is no hope" – of a particular situation. While Max's definition focuses on the individual (his use of the word 'you' referencing the self appears 10 times), he does hint at the presence of another in the process. He speaks to both the temporal and long lasting nature – "after a while" – of self-forgiveness. It not only happened in the past, but it affects our present and guides our future as well. Once the judging stops – "shouldn't have done" – then new meanings can occur and move one onto the path of self-forgiveness.

### *Plot*

Max and his spouse had lived for many years in the southern part of the United States, after they had retired from their jobs. Max and his wife had three children, all of whom were married and lived with their families in other states. His eldest son, a successful businessman, was living with his second wife and her two daughters from a previous marriage in the area where Max and his wife had raised their family. Max and his wife were fond of their son's ex-wife and were concerned that his two children from his first marriage, who did not live with him, were not being treated fairly by his son's new spouse. For example, his eldest son's second wife would buy things for her children but not his son's children, and when they did come over to their house, there were supposedly different rules that they had to follow, separate from those expected of her children. This was evidenced by Max's comment that "his [son's] daughter was living

with the two girls a little while but his wife was treating her daughters with respect and buying them all kinds of things and the rules were for my son's daughter but they didn't apply to her daughters."

Max's second son and his wife had recently had a child and lived out of state as well. He wanted to return to his hometown to have the baby baptized in the same church he had been baptized in and celebrate with the family and close relatives. As a result, Max and his wife made the trip from South Carolina to Pittsburgh to be with the family. After the baptism, his second son arranged for a gathering at a local hotel and Max had fully expected his eldest son to invite them over to his house for a visit, which he did not do. Max said that "we came from South Carolina and my daughter came from Michigan and we all met at a hotel in Pittsburgh...and it so happened that he did not invite us at all to his house, he has a big house, big four bedroom home, where he could have easily accommodated all of the family..." Additionally, Max had noticed that his son kept his distance from his wife and him and questioned that his son "was just going to come here and say hello and leave?" It was at this point that Max got extremely angry and acted on those feelings, making a public declaration that "[Name] is no son of mine and I will never forgive him for this". His son's daughter was one of the first responders to her grandfather's outburst and emotionally reacted to the hurtful words spoken.

Max immediately felt the impact of acting out on his anger. He spent many sleepless nights and cognitively rehearsed what had happened, what he said and the reactions of others around him. Max chose to stay angry with his son for years rather than work toward a peace giving resolution. Max was aware of the damage he was doing to himself physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually and yet remained committed



to keeping his distance. At the urging of his spouse and family, Max eventually sought out someone to talk with about what had happened. Max learned that before he could forgive his son, he had first to forgive himself.

Max publicly disowned his son during a family gathering, which many had traveled from far away to attend. He made a public declaration in front of family and friends, including his son's daughter that this was "no son of mine". Max felt that his son should have invited his wife and him over to his house to stay and not have everyone meet at a hotel. The plot involved someone Max loved and whom he had expectations of to behave in a different manner. It would take him years of agonizing over his decision and help from another person to guide him on the path of self-forgiveness – a process that also called into question his faith with God.

It was easy to 'see' how Max had been impacted by the events he described. At times during the interview, his face turned red when he discussed the times he felt angry, his face had drained with color when he discussed how wrong he felt he had been. Again, I learned an interesting phenomenon in hearing these narratives in that we live the narratives of our lives; they are not just stories to be told but lived experiences that we embody.

#### *Main characters*

The main characters or possibly more accurately stated, the main relationships of Max's story start with the one with his son. Even though Max did not state it exactly, he loved his son dearly. He was upset over the ruptured relationship. Max hinted about his feelings when he said, "but your first born you always have a...you always want to know what they are doing and want to see what is happening with them. He was always a good

kid.” His son was the oldest of his three children and Max had felt close to him at one time.

The relationship Max had with his wife also influenced his action toward his son. He could see how upset she was with his behavior and this connectedness escalated his anger toward his son. He said, “both [Max and his spouse] of us were very upset and I think the reason I was more upset is because my wife was upset. I knew that she was maybe a bit more upset than I was but I saw what kind of condition she was in and I think it played on my nerves...” Max had stated that his wife had a stroke previously and he was acting as guarded caregiver. As I reflected on this thought, I sought confirmation from Max on a subsequent meeting to determine my interpretation. Max commented that seeing his spouse so upset had the effect of raising his level of anger in that he has always seen himself as her protector and even more so since her stroke. As a loving spouse, he wanted to protect her from feeling any more pain.

Another major relationship central to his narrative involved Max’s granddaughter. She had influenced and impacted his feelings when he noticed how upset she became when he made the decision to act on his emotion of anger. Max acknowledged her pain when he said, “his daughter [Max’s granddaughter]...started crying and...I think she was upset too that...I shouldn’t have said that.” Max stated in a subsequent meeting that he had reconciled with his granddaughter and that she had forgiven him for what he said that day.

Another relationship that would prove helpful for Max’s healing through self-forgiveness would be with a professional counselor. At his spouse’s urgings Max “...happened to ask for help in a way and my wife said that we should probably talk to

someone and so as a result we saw someone.” Max found it helpful to accept the advice offered by the counselor as Max reflected on the counselor’s suggestion “that you [Max] have to forgive yourself before you can forgive him [your son] and this helped me along a lot.”

The relationship Max had with God emerged as a central character to his journey of self-forgiveness. Max struggled with his relationship and was frustrated and angry with God at times. At times he felt abandoned by God – “...I felt...the Lord was abandoning me cause we thought we did nothing whatsoever to justify this...we were going to church, we were doing everything we thought was right and then...I thought that the Lord abandoned us.” Even though Max’s faith was weakened he continued to pray, hoping for an answer. Eventually Max related that his prayers were answered – “finally, the Lord did hear me but maybe all of that prayer did not go for naught and eventually I guess I seemed kind of weak, like it says we are all weak souls at time. You get kind of weak and you forget, things aren’t happening and I guess you got to realize that the Lord can’t change things overnight. You got to continue to keep praying that something is going to happen to come back to where it was before so I kept doing that and it did take a while but eventually it happened.” Max was humbled by the experience with God in that he learned that it is in God’s time and not ours. He learned that even though he feels weak at times and like giving up that he must remain faithful and believe that his prayers will be answered and not necessarily in ways or the time he expects.

#### *Tensive moments*

The tensive points of Max’s narrative came in the beginning when he disowned his son – “I decided to tell him you are no son of mine”, and the fallout that followed.

Max had made a decision to act on severing his relationship with his first-born son. This was not an easy choice and one that in hindsight caused him great pain and suffering. Max would discover the depth of the pain and suffering is equal to the love one feels for that person as he embodied the experience. Not only did he temporarily sever the relationship with his son, but he also placed a huge emotional strain on other family relationships.

Another tense moment involved an important family relationship, namely that of his son's daughter. The moment occurred when Max registered the expression on his granddaughter's face when he said those regrettable words. There was a domino effect related to Max's decision to act from his outward expression of his anger, to how others were affected by his actions to how he internalized those raw, painful feelings and the way they affected his way of being in the world. The internalization of his feelings would lead to another tense moment and that of cognitive rehearsal.

One point that was pervasive throughout his narrative was when he played the drama over and over in his head, going back and forth, questioning why his son did what he did and how he (Max) should have known better than to act out on anger – "...I would say that yes, I'm sorry and then I would say why in the hell did he do that? He should have known better..." As long as one permits that tape to be played repeatedly then one cannot escape the meaning that event holds and thus, prevents them from ever moving beyond the wound. In essence, it is what keeps one 'stuck' in the past.

For Max, the telling of the story became a high drama point as he related to me at the end of our interview – "...I feel that I've been drained but yet I feel good about it". I had not realized how demanding and difficult it had been for Max. He literally looked

tired after sharing his story with me. I had an appreciation for the toll the telling of his narrative had on him and yet at the same time I also sensed a healing of sorts in that having another person listen and validate his experience without judging proved to be helpful. Max ended the interview with a huge sigh of relief.

In summary, the emotional impacts that pervaded the story include his acting out in anger toward his son – “you are no son of mine”. The fallout left an emotional wound that would take years to heal – I couldn’t sleep for many nights, just lay awake thinking about it and maybe a year, a year and a half”. Max’s granddaughter was most likely traumatized by the outburst of anger in a public place directed at someone she loved – “...his daughter who started crying”. Max’s family had to feel the impact of his actions as his family had to make sense out of what they experienced in the moment. Max’s carrying the emotional pain for years without really discussing it with someone else to help gain a different perspective had the debilitating effect of impacting his physical health – “I had a lot of sleepless nights and I’m sure it didn’t do my health any good...” Max was angry with God because he believed he was doing what God had asked of him by praying to Him and yet Max believed his prayers were being ignored – “...we were doing everything we thought was right and then, we thought, I thought the Lord had abandoned us”.

*A framework for understanding self-forgiveness (Max’s emplotted narrative)*

Max’s journey of self-forgiveness started when he could no longer avoid or deny that what had happened between his son and him was not going to get better if something did not change. Max felt separated from his son and it was deeply troubling/painful, especially in comparison to his other children. The cognitive rehearsal only reinforced

the anxiety and despair he was going through. These feelings also had a way of influencing and impacting Max's ability to be with others. For instance, it kept him from fully engaging with others as he kept the feelings to himself and thus, limited how he could be with others, as he stayed preoccupied with his thoughts. Max thought it would work itself out, especially as a consequence of his prayers for exactly such a resolution. He felt a deep sense of emptiness, sadness and remorse, as was evidenced by his tears when recalling the situation where he thought the relationship with his son was gone forever. Max was mourning the loss of his son and what that meant to him. He engaged in self-recrimination, often "beating himself up" over what he said and how he had said it.

Max sought help, or more appropriately acceptance, through another. He was able to find a non-judgmental individual to work with him on settling his anger, alienation, and mistakes as he (Max) understood them. All the while, Max remained in prayer, testing his faith, asking for help in changing the relationship with his son. Max believed in the hope that he and his son could get past this wound and come to a healing on the other side. It would seem then that Max's prayers had been answered when he was given the opportunity to interact with his son at a family function. It may be said that it was "grace" that intervened and allowed Max to physically embrace his son and metaphorically in the holding of one another, there was a letting go of the anger, resentment and hard feelings. As time progressed, Max was able to lessen the self-recrimination and anguish he felt over his way of being in the world with others and came to accept who he was and what he had become. This acceptance has led Max to be able to deepen his bond with his son and allowed him to be more fully present to those around

him. Now, rather than replay the incident over and over in his mind, Max can be more fully integrated in the day-to-day movement of life. He no longer obsesses about analyzing the situation and participates more easily and freely in life. Max's physical health has improved and he is sleeping much better these days. Max was able to loosen the grip the past had on him and learned to understand that his relationship with his son had changed, some of which was his doing. He was able to accept his role in the change process and came to terms accepting himself. Through the challenge of his faith, Max also came to know that while he may be weak, he is also like others.

Themes in the Subplots of self-forgiveness:

1. An irreversible choice has been made toward a loved one. Max acted on his feeling of anger, from his own needs, in the process seemingly encroaching on the needs of others.
2. The choice affected him in all aspects of his being – emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, and interpersonally.
3. It takes a long time to recover/heal.
4. Another is involved in the healing process; self-forgiveness is relational.
5. It calls into question one's faith
6. Self-forgiveness involves a spiritual component.
7. It is easy to get caught up replaying the situation.
8. Self-forgiveness is a perpetual process without end.

*Researcher responses to/during the interview*

Upon hearing Max's story, I initially made a judgment I believed may not have been uncommon among many people, namely that the issue was not a "big deal", especially considering that there are many more socially reprehensible acts such as murder or the exploitation of defenseless people that may pose a challenge to forgiveness. As I listened, however, to the deep manner in which this incident affected Max, it struck me that each of us struggle with, or are affected, by events in a deeply personal manner such that an outside judgment of the severity or depth of the issue is wholly inappropriate. For Max, this experience affected him on every human level, spiritual, emotional, physical, etc. His days were filled with sleepless struggles and agonizing regrets that wound and leaves one's spirit in need of healing.

As Max's story continued, I could not help but put myself - as the father of a son who happens to be my oldest and only - in Max's position, and imagining how difficult it would be that lose that connection. Losing a loved one is difficult enough but when it is one's child I imagined it one of the most devastating losses a parent endures. Again, whereas I appreciated how important it is to approach my research participants free of a judgmental attitude, I also realized that one's own life experience, expectations, and circumstances inevitably enter the research process. Yet, even as this "contamination" may bias the research interpretation, it need not be in the form of a liability, as this example of my own relationship to my son perhaps afforded an empathic window into what Max was trying to tell me.

Interview with Joyce (The transcript of this interview is attached as Appendix IV)

Joyce was a divorced mother of a thirteen-year-old daughter at the time of our interview. She worked as a mental health professional and responded to the notice I



placed in the common gathering room at her place of employment. Joyce requested that we meet in her office after hours to insure privacy and solitude.

When I arrived at Joyce's place of employment the main entrance was secure and she greeted me professionally at the front door. She escorted me through a maze of hallways into her office. Once inside, she closed the door to prevent any distractions. Joyce's college degrees were hung neatly on the walls above her desk. Her office was decorated with many personal touches including photos she had taken of her daughter and nature. Vases containing dried floral arrangements were strategically placed throughout the space as well. She turned out the overhead lights and decided to use the lamps and natural light in her office. There was streetlight directly outside her office window, which also provided lighting to our space. She offered me some candy and something to drink. She arranged two comfortable chairs facing one another and offered me my choice.

Joyce opened the discussion by asking me about my research project and what were my expected outcomes. She did not appear nervous and conversed easily and comfortably, which had the effect of putting me at ease. I introduced the consent form and she took a moment to read through it. She signed and returned it to me without any questions. I initiated a test loop while she moved a small table between us for me to set the recorder on and commented that she hoped everything went well, doubting the reliability of modern technology. I proceeded to ask Joyce what self-forgiveness meant to her.

### *Self-forgiveness defined*

Joyce stated that self-forgiveness meant, “not taking responsibility or blame for another person’s hurt or pain that I feel that I have caused. If I cannot feel responsible for that...that seems like self-forgiveness to me.” Her definition was short and to the point and addressed more of a cognitive domain than an experiential one. She hinted at feeling guilty over a decision one has made that results in the pain of another, the assumption being that the ‘other’ is someone very important in one’s life. Her definition also seems to include taking on another’s pain as one’s own along with whatever ill will feelings one has toward oneself, a doubling up as it were. Learning to let go, stop judging oneself and accepting the choices she made would be a part of her journey as well.

### *Plot*

The plot of Joyce’s story was breaking her wedding vows with her husband of ten years for a lesbian relationship, and putting her daughter through these changes. She had been in a heterosexual relationship with her former husband for thirteen years, ten of which she had been married to him. She described her life as the ideal arrangement with a precious young daughter and working, faithful spouse. She remembered saying, “...often to people I love my life, I love my life, I love my life [Note: Joyce sings these words.] I love my husband; I love my daughter...the full situation. It was great.” For the first eight of those married years she was a “stay-at-home Mom” and decided to return to graduate school during the last two years of her marriage. During that time she discovered that she was starting to have feelings for a woman and realized she had a “crush” on one of her professors, as she stated, “...I had a female professor. I knew she was gay, she had a partner...But, I started to have these feelings like a crush on a woman,

never had had that before.” She admitted these feelings to her husband but they dismissed them not realizing the impact they were eventually going to have on Joyce – “I told my husband about it, we laughed about it and that was that.” After that encounter Joyce met up with another student whom she became friends with and that developed into an intimate emotional affair, one that would ultimately change the course of her married life, as she knew it then.

She struggled with ending her marriage, not understanding the feelings she was having for another woman, as well as her daughter’s conception of what a “normal” family life would be like. She went from living at home with her husband and daughter to moving out on her own, to living with her partner and sharing custody of her daughter. Joyce’s journey to self-forgiveness involved self-punishment and an element of emotional self-destruction, which she tried to medicate through alcohol and isolation. Joyce described this part of her journey in reference to addiction. She said, “...I hate this actually but it seems to serve as a pretty decent analogy when...people with addictive issues or alcohol issues reach what they call a bottom before they’re willing to do whatever they’re willing to do. It was my version of a bottom only it wasn’t a bottom, it was a depth of pain that I couldn’t carry anymore. It was too deeply painful...I couldn’t function basically, so it was reaching that depth of pain...” Joyce’s story involved a journey of healing that brought her out of this depth of pain by forgiving herself for the choice she had made. She has had to learn to reconnect with people and she learned to reach out through professional counseling. Part of her healing journey has been to connect with people “just like” her. As she continues to heal, she is taking better care of

herself physically and she has come to realize that self-forgiveness in this instance is something that will continue throughout her life.

Joyce had admitted to me at a subsequent meeting that she chose to tell me her story because she viewed me, as someone who she believed was non-judgmental. I felt honored in the moment and thanked her for sharing that with me. I wondered how the interview could have been affected if she had seen me in some other light. It highlighted for me how the researcher's presence does affect the outcomes of the data collection.

### *Main characters*

The main characters of Joyce's narrative include her husband, her daughter and her partner. As the story unfolds, her husband starts out as a central character and following the dissolution of her marriage his importance diminished. Joyce struggled with her feelings over how her husband had reacted to her infidelity. She believed it was how he found out that disturbed him the most. He had discovered the affair by looking through some of Joyce's e-mails. What had made him suspicious is that he started to notice that Joyce seemed to be emotionally distant when they were together and when he questioned her about it, she denied it. So when he did figure it out, he felt completely betrayed and lied to, which infuriated him. As a result, Joyce believed she was responsible for the pain he was feeling and found it difficult not to blame herself for everything that had gone wrong in their marriage. This emerged as a central theme in Joyce's definition of self-forgiveness as previously stated. It was hardest for her when he was nice to her, treating her with dignity and respect. It was at these times that she felt overwrought with guilt and unable to forgive herself for what she had done. However, there were other times when he would act full of rage and Joyce felt fearful for not only

her own safety but that of her daughter as well. She stated that although he never acted out on his anger, she was nonetheless scared when his temper would escalate to that level. For Joyce, the vacillation between moods would act as a buffer and insulate her from feeling totally responsible for their marriage ending. It was in these moments that she was able to find self-forgiveness. In her words, she said –

...part of me that still is cautious that the rageful, angry, bitter person is going to come back...I think part of the reason I was able to forgive myself for that part is because his behavior was so outrageous and so unacceptable, I mean...he was...I was fearful, he never hit me, he never touched me but I felt threatened many, many times. I was always ready to take my daughter and run because that's how angry he was and overpowering, umm, and he can take over a room and he did. So, there's something in me that almost feels like well, he was acting so badly that the fact that I acted so poorly, it kind of equaled each other out...It's kind of a bizarre rationale that, maybe that's what it is. The reason I think that is because to this day when he's kind to me that's when I still relapse into not forgiving myself. As long as he can be an asshole and just be an absolute jerk about things I can be...I'm okay. There's almost this way I can rationalize what I did. But when he's the kind person that I knew and the thoughtful person that I knew, umm, that's when I have little relapses.

After making his discovery, her husband wanted to continue working on their marriage. They contacted a marriage counselor, but Joyce was not willing to end her relationship with her partner. Joyce and her husband decided that a separation might be helpful but it ended in Joyce wanting to move out of their house and live on her own. It was at this point that they had to confront their daughter and break the news to her. Joyce recalled it as “the worst day of her life”.

Her daughter and the impact of the choice of her lifestyle regarding her daughter remained central throughout – “...I can see myself at her wedding day saying *God*, why does she have to have two mothers? Why can't she just have a mother and her Dad and have this be simple?” What is interesting to note is that most of what Joyce fears about

her daughter's lifestyle – was just that – Joyce's fears and not her daughter's. Joyce's daughter adapted to the lifestyle and struggled with accepting the changes in her life. Joyce had to learn how to sort out her daughter's struggles along three pathways; that of her divorced parents, her gay mother, and what was developmentally appropriate for a girl her age. Custody terms were set so that her daughter would spend half the time with her and the other half with her father. It seemed her daughter adjusted to her new lifestyle and Joyce remained hyper-vigilant to her daughter's experiences. Joyce found support from her husband for their daughter throughout this transforming life change.

There were many more characters within Joyce's story and while none stand out as main figures, it is important to note how the story progressed and who was present to help Joyce move through her journey. Two years after having made the decision to leave her former lifestyle, the physical and emotional pain was becoming too intense to endure, especially every time she witnessed her daughter's struggles, attributing it all to "her gay mother or her divorced parents". She was trying to deal with the grief of losing everything that had been close to her and struggling with her own sexual identity. She described this part of her journey, relating it to an addict's term of 'bottoming out'. She felt she had hit the depth of emotional pain that she was capable of handling and could not take on anymore. She found a way as she described it, "to really up the pain" when she was overwrought with guilt and now she needed a way to come back. She turned to some family and friends and found them to be negative, critical and judgmental. She described her *coming out process* as disastrous with a "*very best friend*" judging her on the spot. Joyce had not been ready for the reaction and as a result reacted by withdrawing from everyone. It was at this point in her life that she realized that she had isolated and

alienated herself from everyone whom she felt would judge her in her life except for her daughter and her partner. Joyce's family had a narrative of her that she was just selfish and that she gets whatever she wanted, which had the effect of not seeking support from them. Joyce had found solace and comfort from a therapist whom she worked with throughout the whole process. It was at this time that she also turned to alcohol and had informed her therapist of her use... "...I was open with my therapist about it [alcohol] and I am using alcohol to get through this..." After giving up the alcohol, she needed to reach out and seek support beyond what she was already receiving – "...I didn't want to use alcohol, so I decided I had to let go or sort out..." She went in search of people "just like her" to help move out of her despair. Joyce was able to connect with a group of women with whom she could identify – "...I google'd married lesbian and found...women who go through mid life discovery that...prefer to be with women". It was in connecting with this group that she finally realized that there were many others going through similar issues as she had been and that she could be forgiving of herself much like some of them were capable of doing.

#### *Tensive moments*

The tensive moments of Joyce's narrative include when she realized that she had stronger feelings for someone else in her life that was not her husband and was not a man. She felt it was out of her control to feel this way toward a woman. Even though she and her husband had sought marital counseling once the affair was discovered, Joyce had already known that she was not going to walk away or give up her relationship with her new partner. Joyce logically understood what she was going to give up by leaving her marriage, husband and family, and had been willing to take the risk as she saw it. Joyce

had come to believe rationally / logically that sexual preference was not a choice and upon accepting that belief, she had been able to bring about a healing.

The next moment came when her husband found out she was having an emotional affair with a woman. She could not deny it at this point. Joyce felt guilty for “sneaking around” and lying to him. At some level she was in denial in that she could not believe it was happening to her at this stage of her life and with a woman.

The next moment was also the hardest and remains in her memory that way today. This was when she had to sit down with her daughter and explain to her that she had to move out of the house because of the life she wanted to live. She recounts that day as the “worst day” of her life. She knew that her decision was going to cause her daughter pain and her pain as well as she would give up her life, as she knew it.

*A framework for understanding self-forgiveness (Joyce’s emplotted narrative)*

Joyce described her journey beginning when she was no longer able to endure the depth of emotional pain that she had experienced. She intuitively knew that something was not fundamentally “right” with her. Her experience of estrangement from self and others was deeply painful. Her disconnectedness was accompanied by intense feelings of self-recrimination as she cognitively rehearsed the situation over and over. She was wracked with confusion over her identity, guilt over what she had put her husband and daughter through, anxiety over finding herself in this position at this age in her life, and despair over losing everything and having to start all over with a very uncertain future. Her overwhelming sense of vulnerability resulted in alienation and isolation. She struggled in her remorse and grief over having lost everything that she had once held intimately dear. She was overcome with emptiness from losing her sense of purpose in



life, sadness over the losses she had sacrificed, and intense loneliness as feeling like she was alone – there were no “others like me”. She had decided to heal, otherwise, she would have self-destructed and she needed to re-engage with the world for her sake and the sake of her daughter. The movement from her “bottom” would not be experienced as a forward projectile but more of a vacillation between acceptance and harsh judgment.

Joyce had received loving acceptance at various turns along her path from her husband, daughter, partner, and therapist. Her therapist helped her process her anger associated with her grief, mistakes she made in her marriage, hurtfulness that she exposed her husband, daughter and self to, and alienating herself from the world. Joyce struggled to find those who would not judge her, and understand what she was going through and ultimately support her. Joyce believed that healing would deliver her from the depths of her pain by choosing to self-forgive. Once Joyce was able to embrace that there were others like her struggling with the same issues, she could let go of her old self / identity, along with expectations that the life for her daughter was already culturally defined and scripted. Joyce was finally able to accept herself as she is. This acceptance led to a new relationship with herself and a feeling of being at ease in the world with others. This was a gradual process where Joyce developed a growing sense of ease about her identity and lessened the self-recriminations and anguish over her relationship to the world. This quality is about accepting one’s humanness and can be described as a kind of integration. As she continues to gain full acceptance of her humanness she can expect her connectedness to others to deepen and experience an intimate sense of involvement with self, world, and others. Joyce has learned to live life more fully without constantly

analyzing her past situation. She had to come to terms that she is more like others than separate.

Themes in the Subplots of self-forgiveness:

1. An irreversible choice had been made towards loved ones.
2. She felt she had made a selfish choice.
3. Even though she knew how much pain her choice would cause, she refused to change it.
4. She had to experience a certain degree/amount of pain before she would allow self-forgiveness to take place.
5. The process of self-forgiveness is relational.
6. There is a grieving process associated with the act of self-forgiveness.
7. Her darkest moments came when she tried to go it alone by isolating and alienating herself from formerly supportive others.
8. One can invoke the pain by reliving the moment.
9. Self-forgiveness can take many years.
10. Self-forgiveness brings about a healing and a reconnection to self, world and others.
11. The process of self-forgiveness has no endpoint, it is perpetual.

*Researcher's reaction to/during the interview*

Joyce admitted to me that she chose to tell me her story because she viewed me, as someone who she believed was non-judgmental. I felt honored in the moment and thanked her for sharing that with me. I wondered how the interview could have been

affected if she had seen me in some other light. It highlighted for me how the researcher's presence does affect the outcomes of the data collection.

Perhaps part of this ability, if it is that, arises as well from a very strong sense I had that I could relate to the Joyce's pain regarding her daughter as I, too, had to sit down with my only child and explain to him that his parents will no longer be living together. My experience was different than Joyce's but the anguish and the 'gut-wrenching feel' was no less. It is hard not to feel responsible for our children's pain.

#### Thematic Similarities and Differences Between All Three Participants

Having listed the main narrative themes of each participant, the next step involved a closer scrutiny of those story structures, dynamics, or reconfigurations that are similar and dissimilar to each other across participants with respect to self-forgiveness. To that end, I present a table below, listing the thematic story elements for each participant.

Table 1: Comparison of Participant Story Themes

Lois' story themes	Max's story themes	Joyce's story themes
1. An irreversible choice has been made involving a loved one.	1. An irreversible choice has been made toward a loved one.	1. An irreversible choice had been made towards loved ones.
2. The choice affected Lois comprehensively, in all aspects of her being – emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, and interpersonally.	2. The choice affected him in all aspects of his being – emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually, and interpersonally.	2. She felt she had made a selfish choice.
3. Even though self-forgiveness implies one by virtue of the word "self", it is relational.	3. It takes a long time to recover/heal.	3. Even though she knew how much pain her choice would cause, she refused to change it.
4. It can take many years before	4. Another is involved in the	4. She had to experience a

one gets to a sense of having moved beyond the reproach, sadness, guilt, and other feelings associated with the decision	healing process; self-forgiveness is relational.	certain degree/amount of pain before she would allow self-forgiveness to take place.
5. Attaining a sense of self-forgiveness involves grieving and mourning	5. It calls into question one's faith	5. The process of self-forgiveness is relational.
6. Anger is involved in the process: angry with oneself for making a choice that violates a promise one has made to another, anger with God for taking a loved one away	6. Self-forgiveness involves a spiritual component.	6. There is a grieving process associated with the act of self-forgiveness.
7. The facts do not change but the meaning the facts hold changes. Self-forgiveness allows for a new plot and narrative of self and other to emerge.	7. It is easy to get caught up replaying the situation.	7. Her darkest moments came when she tried to go it alone by isolating and alienating herself from formerly supportive others.
8. The process/journey does not have an endpoint, but is continuous.	8. Self-forgiveness is a perpetual process without end.	8. One can invoke the pain by reliving the moment.
		9. Self-forgiveness can take many years.
		10. Self-forgiveness brings about a healing and a reconnection to self, world and others.
		11. The process of self-forgiveness has no endpoint, it is perpetual

Similarities Between Participants: All three participants discussed narratives that included making a decision that hurt not only themselves but also those that they loved and whom they each had a close personal relationship with; for Lois it was her sister, for

Max his son and for Joyce it was both her husband and daughter. Each participant had acknowledged a responsibility for and to their loved one whom they believed and felt they had wronged. Lois felt responsible for not keeping her promise to her sister. Max felt responsible for not loving his son unconditionally. Joyce felt responsible for breaking her wedding vows and introducing her daughter to a non-conventional lifestyle. The stronger the relationship the more responsible one felt.

All three cried at one point in the narrative, signifying how raw the wound still felt, and even upon the assumption that the process was – in a sense – “completed” or resolved. This leads one to believe that it may be the grieving of the loss that one finds one’s emotions so tender. The grieving process can take a long time and all three experienced a significant loss of a close intimate relationship. The length of time was also an issue that resonated for each. It took many years for each to work through their feelings and learn to live with the decisions that they made.

All three experienced guilt in their process and struggled with ways to overcome it. Their ways included getting angry, hollering at God, losing sleep, isolation, alienation, and weeping. Assuredly, their health was affected by their choices. Joyce stopped taking care of herself and had used alcohol to cope. Max later admitted to feeling depressed and sought his doctor’s advice for medication. Lois also subsequently admitted that her health suffered as well, stating that she had been bed ridden for a period of time.

Each found themselves reliving the most painful moments over and over again. The cognitive rehearsals helped each of them stay ‘stuck’ without hope of ever finding a way out, confirming again the length of time it takes to self-forgive. In this regard, all three were unable to accept or seek any help at first, and tried to go it alone.

The facts never changed for any of them, but the meaning of those events and the choices they made eventually changed. This point alluded to a temporal dimension of the process involving the past (the facts as they remembered them), the present (the way each participant had lived her/his choices and future), and ultimately the meaning those decisions now hold for them. All three learned to look at their situation from a different perspective. The process involved a time-lapsed learning and relearning until eventually a new meaning emerged. It was never about getting *over* it but learning to come to peace with their choice.

Each was able to identify others in their journeys that were able to help them process their feelings over the choices that they made. In essence then the process of self-forgiveness is relational involving other(s). It takes an 'other' for one to experience a journey of self-forgiveness. One becomes wounded in relationships and one must subsequently heal in relationships.

Differences Between Participants: For Lois and Max there was mention of a spiritual dimension called forth by their religious beliefs, but not for Joyce. Lois ("...I would holler at God...I would get mad...") and Max ("...I thought that the Lord had abandoned us.") were angry with God and blamed him for what happened. It felt as though Joyce steered clear of a religious belief influencing her decision to self-forgive. She made no religious references in her interview. Eventually for Lois ("...I do...thank God that [he] was giving peace [to her]") and Max ("...it [Max's faith] is still weak at times because I keep praying for things to happen that don't and I guess that it did in that

experience with my son, you just got to keep praying enough...”), their faith was restored and strengthened.

Max and Joyce sought professional assistance but Lois did not. An inference could be made that by seeking professional help there is a good indication that the time to heal could be lessened. Lois relied on her family and friends. Her spouse had been her greatest support. Still, it is in relationship that all three found themselves getting help.

Joyce found comfort in seeking out others who were making similar choices but Lois and Max did not. Joyce had isolated and alienated herself from her family and friends and sought support in a different, creative way. Lois and Max were able to find some comfort through family and friends.

There was an element of pride and denial present in Joyce and Max’s narrative and was absent from Lois’. For Max, his pride was evidenced in that he believed that his son was to blame and that he had done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment – denial. For Joyce, it was her pride that she could maintain her relationship with a woman and denial that it would affect her marriage, her life. From Joyce’s narrative this came about when she decided she was going to go through with her decision despite the consequences – “I obviously made some conscience (or conscious?) decisions...there was this force so powerful that I was acting on that and not on my commitment to my marriage”. For Max, it was about holding onto his anger toward his son – “...I was very angry...how could he do this to us...” – until he learned new information that would help him let go of his resentment for how he felt his son had treated him – “...I found out that he was having a lot of difficulty with his wife...well maybe it was not all his fault treating us the way he was treating us”.

The thematic similarities and differences will be used along with the literature reviewed to form the basis of the next chapter. The themes will be examined in more detail and used as a foundation to offer an understanding of the journey of self-forgiveness.



## Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

This section reviews and interprets the data, elaborating on emergent themes in order to build toward a proposed framework for understanding the processes involved in self-forgiveness. It should be borne in mind that these narrative themes emerge from the stories of the participants, organized as they are by the researcher to illuminate those story or narrative dynamics deemed structurally important and foundational to the phenomenon that is self-forgiveness. Once those themes have been analyzed and more fully developed, they are used as a springboard for an augmented framework for, and understanding of, self-forgiveness. Furthermore, and as a crucial part of the discussion, this chapter revisits the literature review in light of the research findings, and concludes with implications and potential impacts this research project can have in the fields of psychology, theology and society at large.

### Foundational narrative thematics

#### **1) Self-forgiveness is multi-faceted.**

From their interview transcripts, Lois, Max, and Joyce all attempt some definition or explanation of self-forgiveness. Lois, for example, emphasized an experiential and embodied sense understanding of self-forgiveness (“Self-forgiveness...I think it means being able to live with something that really bothered you for a long time and really be able to put it to rest and not worry about it anymore”). Additionally, the wording of “live with something” in the context of her sentence alludes to an action or choice that she made that she had regretted and that had caused her considerable anguish. There is a temporal dimension to her definition of self-forgiveness in that it spans from the past into

the present, that is “for a long time”, and reaches into the future in that her struggles had been with her for many days, suggested by her use of the words “not worry about it anymore”. The assumption here is that she had not been able to free herself of it, thus living it today and the days that follow. Her use of the words “put it to rest” hints that part of the journey may include the grieving process in which there is a loss and an ultimate coming to peace with what has happened.

Max again notes that “self-forgiveness becomes present when after you feel that you have treated someone poorly and maybe you shouldn’t have. And after a while you feel there is no hope for making amends and you somehow or other you have to forgive yourself seeing or doing some things that you did that you felt that you did in the past that you shouldn’t have done.” Max, as well, emphasizes an experiential and affective understanding of self-forgiveness rather than a cognitive one. For him, as well, a basic tenet for self-forgiveness involves a choice one makes in relation toward another that leaves one feeling anxious and regretful for having acted on that choice, a self-judging and ultimate condemnation. There appears to be a fixed understanding or allowance for only one interpretation – “there is no hope” – of a particular situation. Max’s definition focuses on the individual, his use of the word ‘you’, referencing the self, appears 10 times. Max referred to a relationship with another as part of his definition and while it appears to be in the context of forgiving someone else, it should not be confused with the relational aspect of self-forgiveness. He speaks to both the temporal and long lasting nature – “after a while” – of self-forgiveness. It not only happened in the past, but it affects our present and guides our future as well. Once the judging stops – “shouldn’t

have done” – then new meanings can occur and move one onto the path of self-forgiveness.

Joyce’s understanding (“I guess self-forgiveness to me means not taking responsibility or blame for another person’s hurt or pain that I feel that I have caused. If I cannot feel responsible for that, that seems like self-forgiveness to me.”), on the other hand, seem to involve a rational and cognitive sense of what self-forgiveness entails. Her definition also seemed to include taking on another’s pain as one’s own along with whatever ill will feelings one had toward oneself, a doubling up as it were. Learning to let go, stop judging oneself and accepting the choices she made would be a part of her journey as well.

It would seem immediately apparent – even from as little data as three participants’ understandings, expressed in a few sentences - that any definition of self-forgiveness, any narrow attempt to distill self-forgiveness into one or other singular dimension or component, will run into trouble. Self-forgiveness seems eminently multidimensional and includes the whole person – his or her thoughts, feelings, and behavior. For example, Lois chose to think about her absence from her sister’s deathbed as “not being there for her sister” and abdicating her responsibility. To the extent that she now replays the event in a self-punishing manner, is self-forgiveness about overcoming this system of cognitions, or a prior feeling of guilt for example, and is the destructive behavior of alcoholism a mere supplementary symptom? Put another way, how does one define self-forgiveness in terms of thoughts, feelings or behaviors when it seems to involve them all in so complex and seemingly individualized a manner? Someone else, for example, who may have lost a sibling in similar circumstances in all probability might

have a very different sense of what it means to forgive the self, or what aspect of behavior, emotion and cognition emerges in both salience and time. The question and challenge, then, is how to provide a foundation that is broad enough to speak to the phenomenon but also makes sense at the individual level of experience. It seems to me that a first step towards such a goal or aim is to acknowledge that the divisions of mind, body, and feeling are perhaps inappropriate or inadequate, and that the sense of the whole person, broad as that may be, involved in varying, individual ways, may be a start.

Relatedly, the event or action responded too, or that calls for self-forgiveness, is varied. And, what may be deeply disturbing and facilitative of self-forgiveness for one, may not be so for another. Yet, the variety of situations and events that solicit self-forgiveness notwithstanding, all these choices or events involved another person, another loved one in relationship.

Further, the meaning attached to the event or choice pervades the temporal experience of the world and the other. Past, present, and future become filtered (or perhaps contaminated is a more appropriate image) through the meaning of the choice or event, a seemingly fixed meaning that does not permit of other alternatives. Now, in all cases, whereas self-forgiveness does prompt a new way of looking at the event, the mere fact of the event or choice's happening cannot be undone. There is consequently, a process or movement that is even prior to the changed, self-forgiving interpretation – a process of loss and mourning, which is examined in the second thematic below.

This research thus clearly illustrates – by the participants' own understanding - and at a minimum, that self-forgiveness involves the whole person, that it involves a choice or action that affects at least one other, important relationship, that it pervades the

experience of the world in a temporal sense, and that the recognition that the event or decision itself cannot be undone spurs a process of mourning such that a new understanding of the event or decision may emerge.

## ***2) Self-forgiveness, loss, and mourning.***

The following excerpts from the interviews provide a starting point for this thematic:

Lois: “I was not with my sister when she died, [crying] and...the night before she died I was going to visit her and *I was really tired and I didn't go.*”

Max: “*I felt treated...very poorly...*that upset me and I said, I could not understand why you did it, in fact you are not part of the family as far as I'm concerned and you're no son of mine. So that is what upset me and I guess I said it out of anger because I was very angry...”

Joyce: “I felt responsible for other people's pain and hurt in which I had to work on self-forgiveness were toward *breaking the vows of my marriage* to my husband and umm inflicting, a little severe of a word but, inflicting umm a non traditional life style on my daughter... I was ... unfaithful...he [my husband] was noticing that I was becoming emotionally unavailable.”

In each of the interviews, one of the most salient aspects of their narratives revolved around the experience of a significant loss, a death both in reality and of sorts. For Lois, it was the death of her sister. For Max, it was the death of his relationship with his son, and for Joyce, it was the death of her former lifestyle as a heterosexual, married woman. All three included the death of a close personal relationship, which leads one to

believe that self-forgiveness is intimately linked to grieving. Indeed, the terms and debates of mourning were often invoked, across all three interviews – for example, was it about “getting over” loss, “coming to terms with” loss, perhaps both? And if the loss was the work of some or other higher power, are we to understand this event as his punishment? Or some blessing to be revealed later? Or some meaning that will forever remain obscured and out of sight? Part of the journey involved in self-forgiveness seemed clearly to involve a process akin to the grieving process – or perhaps it *is* a grieving. The elements of grieving, including sadness, anger, emptiness, questioning of one’s faith, are certainly all invoked by all the participants as they related what was involved in self-forgiveness.

There is some support in the literature for a relationship between forgiveness and mourning (for example, Hunter, 1978). As phenomenon, mourning has been researched quite extensively, certainly much, much more so than forgiveness. And, while some of the selfsame criticisms of natural science research as it pertains to forgiveness also characterize research pertaining to mourning, it is true that a greater variety of research and theory is available. We can, for example, expect certain general – if not normative – stages in the process, including denial, sadness, anger, helplessness, and isolation. With the exception of Lois’s story, that did involve a physical death, Max and Joyce lost a relationship, but their loss took on similar attributes as would be expected of mourning a physical death. Coming to acceptance in each of these cases consequently also involved the experience of feelings of separation, helplessness and isolation. Additionally, there was an acknowledgment and expression of feelings of anger, even hatred. And, as Watts and Gulliford (2004) report on mourning in general, one can become ‘stuck’ in the

process when these feelings of anger are not acknowledged, and especially if they are unconscious or masked by guilt. Lastly, the ability to let go of those feelings and progress into a new way of being, which always would have a hint of pain and sadness, but in which nurturing memories could be discovered is as much a characteristic of mourning a physical death as the loss of relationship in this process of self-forgiveness. However, there is of course a difference. Frequently, in general mourning, the death or loss is outside of the grieving person's control. In this case, it is precisely the grieving person who causes, in a sense, the loss – who brings it about. There are consequently additional dynamics at work here, and further research should take special care in noting these (for example, whether guilt is more pronounced in the self-forgiveness process than in “general” mourning). The sense, then, of a grieving process that results from a broken promise, leads into the next theme.

Furthermore, if there is a moment proper to self-forgiveness, it seems that the recognition of the need to come to terms with loss comes close. Before this moment, there is reproach, self-recrimination, a wish and fantasy that the event never happened or that the decision was never taken, or that the action was never embarked upon. Yet, it seems only upon realizing that the event did happen, that there was a loss, and that there must – as a consequence – be a certain coming to terms, a certain grieving as it were, that self-forgiveness becomes a realizable possibility.

### **3) *A promise is broken.***

As broad and encompassing as the involvement of the whole person, as narrow and precise seem to be the profound sense of self-forgiveness arising from, or being given shape by, an event that involves a broken promise or a disappointed expectation.

So for example, Lois says: “I felt that I let her [sister] down by not being there with her because we said there would always be somebody there with you...” Max, in turn, mentioned that “I decided to tell him you are no son of mine and that I could never forgive him...” while Joyce makes mention of her- “...breaking the vows of my marriage to my husband...inflicting a non-traditional lifestyle on my daughter.”

The breached promise is morally and ethically based and, by that token, involves another. As ethic and moral, an abstract quality is introduced – in fact, one may say a spiritual dimension; a promise, after all, is nothing tangible or empirical, but as real in the sense of it being felt as responsibility in the very core of who we are. No wonder the oft-cited anonymous quote – “we are only as good as our word” – has so much currency.

Inasmuch as a promise is always already a relation, it invokes – from the very start – the notions of ethics, care, and responsibility; the very intersubjective relationship is often built on a promise, that I will not hurt you or lie to you. But yet, a promise or expectation is precisely such that it cannot guarantee itself – it has to operate on a premise of truth for it to be a promise. The promise is made between two people and it is what binds them together. It speaks to the relational and spiritual connection that we share with one another. At the relational level one has an ethical responsibility to fulfill, as in Lois’ case, a certain duty to her sister, and in some cases maintain a lifelong perpetual commitment as in Max’s promise to always be his son’s father. Each participant demonstrated an expectation of care based on her/his promise to the other; for Lois it was to provide devoted loving support to her sister, for Max it was unconditional love for his son and for Joyce it was to love her spouse ‘for better or worse’. On a spiritual level, love was a common denominator involved in each promise that each



participant had made toward the other - each felt not only responsible for the individual to whom the fidelity of the promise was owed, but also to be faithful to the promise, that is, keeping it. One has to assume that if one is responsible then one must feel it is in her/his control to insure that it is kept and not broken. All three participants believed they were responsible for the promises they made and therefore, had control over them. One troubling notion that came to light regarding making a promise is that one tends to associate it with a guarantee. Each participant had believed that s/he would be able to keep her/his promise, in other words guarantee it. It was not clear in all cases if the recipient of such promises viewed them as absolute guarantees, but for these participants, they had internalized them as such.

Therefore, the breaking of a promise created a huge emotional wound in one's way of being. Not unlike the manner in which healing, and self-forgiveness, involves the whole person, the wound or breach, too, is felt on every level – spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. At the spiritual, as was demonstrated, the feeling was of separation from the Divine, losing not only a relationship with the loved earthly other but also with the self and the divinely Other. Therefore, when the promise is broken and when love is no longer able to be shared then one has cut oneself off not only from the other but the Divine as well. The bond that held the relationship together got shattered when the promise was broken. If one had internalized that s/he was in absolute control, it follows that one is now able to self-incriminate for failing to uphold her/his end of the contractual agreement. One becomes judge and jury in a trial of which the verdict is already known – in fact, where the trial itself is a perpetual punishment in the knowledge of its outcome.

The broken promise represents the choice one makes or the decision one chooses to act on. It is an action-oriented step that is immediately judged. It is the initiation of an emotional wound that could possibly remain untreated for many years. In subsequent meetings with each of the participants, I inquired if there was forethought, a premeditation of sorts to the breaking of the promise. As I suspected, with Lois there was not, she had made a decision to stay home the night before her sister's death not on the morning she died. It was out of Lois' control when the promise got broken, but Lois refused to see it that way for many years, she felt responsible. For Max and Joyce, the opposite was the case. Max said that it took a long time to build up to the point when he finally felt compelled to say something to his son, to break their relationship, the oft unspoken promise between a parent and child of unconditional love. For Joyce, she was conscious of the choice she was making but felt she was dealing with a force too powerful for her not to break her wedding vows. However, once broken, the promise unleashes the powerful aftermath of pain associated with harshly and critically judging oneself, the point of the next theme.

***4) Self-inflicted and repeated pain is experienced over time, without any noticeable change or evolving benefit.***

It has been striking, across all three interviews, that self-forgiveness could only arise on the substratum of an auto-repetitive pain, across time.

Lois notes that "My sister has been gone for 18 years. And...I bet it's taken 15 of those years to say it's ok, because it was just something I just couldn't deal with", while Max says that "...it was a very trying time and of course, I didn't sleep for months

thinking about it. It was tough...Oh, it was tough. Like I said, I couldn't sleep for many nights, just lay awake thinking about it and maybe a year, a year and a half." Joyce notes that "There was nothing I could do about the struggle; it was what it was and for me to just put one foot in front of the other I had to let go of some of the...I just couldn't tolerate the physical or emotional...that level of physical and emotional pain it was causing me...And part of it I think I did to feel badly that you deserve, I felt like I deserved to feel that badly because of what I've done..."

Whether it is so that one "needs" to endure an amount of pain or self-punishment equal to or greater than what one has believed to have inflicted (perhaps from a cultural narrative of an eye-for-eye justice, or what you sow you shall reap), or whether the intensity of the breach necessitates the passing of time and depth of feeling, the fact of the matter is that all subjects in this research testified to both as characteristic of their journey. It does make sense, if an eye for eye retribution is the most readily available narrative cultural source, that one may believe that the self-punishment one endures must be equal to [sometimes possibly greater than] what one has believed to inflict upon others. The amount of pain one must endure could be arguably described as socially prescribed. When we are unable to forgive others for certain offenses, one can be heard to say phrases such as "you haven't suffered enough" or "when you feel as much pain as you put me through then can you can stop hurting." The social implication again is that one equals the score – an eye for an eye. Depending on how serious the infraction may have been will also determine how long it will take if one is to repay kind for kind. For example, Joyce broke her wedding vows to her spouse of ten years. From a social perspective, is one to assume that Joyce should take that many years to forgive herself or

could she reduce the time owed with a more deliberate and more painful self-punishment to eliminate the debt or even the score?

Yet, while it may well be that the cultural availability of a self-punishing response, it is also likely that the level of attachment to the person disappointed or wronged may play an important role. That is, the more attached an individual is to the offended party, the more intense the amount of pain and recrimination. The level of attachment and the meaning that holds for a person influences the degree, amount and intensity of the pain that one must feel obligated to administer to oneself. Along with feeling the self-inflicted pain of having broken a promise, there is also the grief involved in the loss. There appears to be a doubling of the pain. As long as one feels responsible for the promise being broken, then one cannot escape the pain involved and must continue to self-administer. In essence there are two kinds of pain that one must manage; the self-inflicted kind and the pain associated with the loss. Joyce spoke about the compounding of the pain, saying “that absolute pain like I never felt before of the loss of all that husband, family, time with my daughter, all of that lifestyle, huge piece, to between feeling that loss and that struggle about my own sexuality and who I was; I was going to self destruct if I didn’t let go of something. And I knew I had to experience the grief.” One has to grieve the loss of the relationship one had with the other. Yet, it is perhaps paradoxically precisely the intensification of the pain and punishment that allows an opening for the process of self-forgiveness. This does not mean that the pain will subside but be directed toward the loss of the relationship with the other instead of being primarily focused on the self.

When understood along the lines of the grieving process as previously examined, the journey of self-forgiveness would be expected to be life long. Kahlil Gibran (1923) offers a number of analogies and insights directly relevant to what the participants have articulated, for example, that -

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.  
 And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was  
 oftentimes filled with your tears.  
 And how else can it be?  
 The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you  
 can contain.  
 Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in  
 the potter's oven?  
 And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was  
 hollowed with knives?  
 When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find  
 it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.  
 When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see  
 that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight  
 (P. 29).

Each one of these journeys of self-forgiveness involved the loss of a significant other and as Gibran poetically referred – these relationships were carved deep into the very essence of who the participant was and again highlights the theme that self-forgiveness is relational and the amount of sorrow one feels when this loss has been experienced is premised on the quality and depth of the relationship. Again the notion of the importance of attachment to the other is supported here as well.

But, as indicated in the section heading for this thematic, it is not just that the incident or breach is replayed, or that a self-punishment occurs over time, but also that there seems to be little change across time. Lois, for example, says that “...truly not to think about it *every single day* [pause] I would say maybe 10 years I wrestled back and forth, cried over it, talked about it...I think there were moments or times when I could

think about it and maybe I would say ‘ok this is it, we’re not going to dwell on this anymore, we’re not going to think about this in this way anymore, we’re just gonna say it’s alright and then umm, like something about her could come back, I..I’d just have a thought of her and it will all come back again and...I put it to rest one more time...”

There is therefore, in the aftermath of the breach, a period of time that involves a vacillation between thoughts and feelings that are conducive to forgiving, and thoughts and feelings that reignite the original wound, such as ruminating about the offense and the hurt it caused self and others. There is a cognitive rehearsal at play and linked to the loss involved; one feels obligated to self-punish, to feel the loss more intensely until one has evened the score, settled the debt as it were and as if it is only oneself that must be paid. This process is the longest lasting and keeps the person ‘stuck’. It acts as a holding and staging area.

However, it is precisely this notion of being stuck, of being perpetually staged in the same scene that prompts at least the possibility of change beyond fantasy and wish.

***5) A pivotal point in the process of self-forgiveness involves a spiritual / relational connection to an other***

As the pain became too intense to deal with internally, each participant had to reach outside her/himself but could only do so once s/he was able to suspend her/his belief that s/he deserved to be punished. At first, each participant was not able to hold the suspension of her/his belief but “drifted” away. Over time, each would slowly gain the strength to hold it more securely in place. Lois said, “there were moments...when I could think about it and...say ‘ok this is it, we’re not going to dwell on this anymore,

we're not going to think about this in this way anymore...I'd just have a thought of her and it will all come back again...and...I put it to rest one more time...but those times when I think about her now...I can deal with it better now..." It took time but Lois eventually was able to maintain her balance around suspending her belief. Joyce used the analogy of having a relapse when she was unable to hold onto suspending her belief – "I still relapse into not forgiving myself." Even after Joyce had found the strength within herself, it continued to take an effort for her to keep it steadfast. She said, "that's kind of its permanent home...you can invite it in but it takes effort going out to be able to bring it back in. It just isn't out there for the taking without any kind of effort from me...Maybe it won't always..." There is no way to keep the suspension permanent; it will always take energy to keep it at bay. Although, once the belief was stabilized then one can move toward reaching out and accepting the connection with another.

One way Max reached out was through professional help – "I saw somebody that...was professional, I had a talk with and he mentioned that you have to forgive yourself before you can forgive him and this helped me along a lot." Max's connection to the spiritual came from the advice provided by a professional counselor and his willingness to accept it. In a spiritual way, Max was also able to reach for help through his belief in God: he said, "I prayed a lot...I found myself many times praying with tears in my eyes when I thought I was not going to get my son back..." Max's faith was tested and he discovered at times how weak this experience had left him especially, spiritually – "the Lord did hear me...I seemed kind of weak, like it says we are all weak souls at time. You get kind of weak...you've got to realize that the Lord can't change things overnight..." Lois struggled in her relationship with God, getting angry with him at

times – “I was always angry...there were a lot of times I’d come home and if I were alone, I would just cry, I would holler at God, I would talk to him and I would get mad and ask him why?” Lois and Max both found their faith to be strengthened and renewed and had been able to turn the pain and suffering away from themselves and found peace in releasing their pain and suffering over to God. The pain and suffering did not end immediately; all the participants stated that the process was gradual and that their discomfort eased but it is never truly gone. It is about learning to come to peace with oneself and accepting the loss one has endured.

For Joyce, the pivotal point came from seeking out “other women like” her. Joyce was literally in pursuit of people who “looked” just like her. This led her to a weekend workshop where there were...

“other women like me. Now all along the way mind you I’m ready to bolt because if there is no one in there with lipstick or nail polish or hair that is, you know, not longer than an inch long, *I’m gone*. Because I wanted to see somebody that looked like me that was going through this...And that was *the* most powerful turning point for me...looking at them and watching them torture themselves with blame and guilt, it made it so clear to me how not at fault I was. And this observation that didn’t come clear to me until the end...a *huge* turning point for me was seeing where I’d been and being able to look at them and I knew I could say to them – this isn’t your fault, be gentle with yourself, you know, this isn’t something you chose. And so when I was able...when I saw what I was able to do for them then I realized I could do that for myself. So that was a huge piece, finding like people going through the same thing.”

Joyce could not stress enough how important the relational aspect of the process of self-forgiveness had been and continues to be. It is finding oneself connected with the human community in the end that ultimately brings about the healing. This re-attachment through the telling of one’s story leads to the last theme.

***6) The sharing of one’s personal narrative of self-forgiveness is more than a mere telling of a story; it is also active reconfiguration of meaning towards healing.***



Lois: “In talking with you about my sister, it brought back a lot of feelings of missing her. It also made me realize that she left us when she needed to and that was something only she could do. She did not need me. I didn't think I would cry so much when talking about her. Maybe I was keeping more inside than I realized. I did feel as though a weight was lifted after sharing this with you.”

Max: “I actually feel weak, I feel that I've been drained but yet I feel good about it. I feel very weak, but I feel good that things have come to pass the way they did.”

Joyce: “Less detached from the world and that's just because it's a story that very few people know, so, if I am able to share it I feel just a little more connected with the world, which for me that's been such a huge loss cause I'm so, such a person that likes to connect with people and part of that in me just being who I am. So, that loss of being that person has been big so to share with you without editing and all the details makes me feel more connected.”

All the participants eventually came to peace in accepting what had happened as part of who they were, rather than trying to change what had happened, which they ultimately realized was not a possibility. The journeys that each participant embarked upon could not be neatly organized as though one were receiving detailed instructions to follow on a map. The journeys did not seek the shortest distance between two points but were subjected to many turns and detours. In this way the journey becomes circuitous, difficult and at times hazardous, hazardous to one's health and well being. From an optimistic perspective, the journey was an adventure in helping each participant find her/his way out of a dark and unsettling way of being to a healthy, nurturing and connected sense of belonging.

From a human perspective, it seems necessary to approach these relationships as unbiased and non-judgmental as one can. There is a healing in the telling of the story alone without any therapeutic intervention. There appears to be a sense of healing when one can share one's embodied narrative to one who remains emotionally present and genuinely interested in how a person brings meaning to her/his life experiences. In the sharing of this intimate dialogue one can come to terms possibly that s/he is no longer alone and feel connected to the human community.

*Proposed Framework for understanding the Processes of Self-forgiveness*

After examining the themes and working through the individual journeys, a particular perspective regarding the journey began to unfold. The transcripts and research helped reinforce that the definition of self-forgiveness is multi-faceted. Based on all that is contained herein, a general framework for understanding the process of self-forgiveness appeared to be the following:

- I. An action, or inaction, has an effect on an interpersonal relationship, one of the defining characteristics being that it involves loss.
- II. A profound sense of being wounded ensues, its defining characteristic being that the whole person is implicated, and feels pained – mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.
- III. The wound is sustained with self-punishment, isolation, alienation, withdrawal, and self-blame. Others may also keep the wound alive with judgment and criticism, but the defining feature is that the person is well able to maintain the sense of hurt and self-recrimination him or herself.
- IV. Pain becomes too intense and action is taken to rid the self of such pain.
- V. One tries to heal the self with many potions and elixirs, such as drugs and alcohol, or behavioral promises and interventions, such as self-help materials, all seemingly to no or little avail.
- VI. A pivotal point introduces itself, marking a different approach, rooted in a spiritual and/or relational understanding.
- VII. The relation can exist with a counselor, therapist, deity, prayer, and/or another person. One learns to accept the decision/choice one has made and the results of the actions taken. It is at this point that self-forgiveness

permits one to explore the spiritual nature of one's existence and to hopefully, eventually find harmony within.

- VIII. Eventually, new meanings of the facts of the experience will be accepted to bring about a healing. The process is perpetual and life changing. There will be a sense of balance and return to health experienced by one's forgiveness of self.

This framework is not a linear diagram that could be followed sequentially. For example, one may find oneself repeating or lapsing backward onto previous phases or positions. To illustrate, a person may reach the fourth step and realize the action taken does not work for her/him and s/he now retreats back to step three. The idea is to help those interested in such a pursuit to gain an appreciation of all that may be involved. It provides a way in which others can communicate and offer assistance to those who struggle in any one given phase.

Moreover, it may perhaps be telling and striking that what is included in this framework or heuristic, is the very event that causes the distress, as well as the distress itself. Some readers may object – or have done so already – and argue that the whole story about how a promise was broken, and the distress and recrimination that occurs thereafter, is not self-forgiveness: that self-forgiveness starts at some other point or place, as one extricates oneself from the self-recrimination or distress. These readers may look for such a pivotal moment – a moment proper to self-forgiveness, as it were – and search for a turning point, firstly, that marks the beginning of this movement of self-forgiveness, and an end-point, a telos, that marks the completion and successful attainment of self-forgiveness. Suffice it to say, by the very framework above, that this view is not one I hold, or find supported by my interviews. Asking participants to tell me about self-forgiveness does not mean some pivotal turning point – by their understanding

the event and their actions and decisions in the distressing event, are as much part of self-forgiveness as whatever later healing or recovery is. The one needs the other, and cannot be separated from each other. Moreover, to assume some telos or endpoint, a moment when self-forgiveness is “achieved” or “attained” is not borne out by this research. In fact, it is a continuing process, with no expected end, at least not in the sense of an ending or closing of the event – the only manner of closing the event, and then only for a singular party, is with death or the loss of memory, another kind of death.

### Revisiting the Literature

This general framework inevitably recycles and dialogues with Robert Enright and the Human Development Group’s definition of forgiveness (1991). While some limitations were already highlighted in the literature review, these and others now continued to surface as a result of my own data and interpretation. Personally, there remained an unsettled intuitive notion to accept the definition as it was written. I reread Solomon Schimmel’s book, *Wounds not healed by time*, (2002) and was intrigued by his statement that the much-quoted Enright definitional was grounded in Christian theology. Rereading the definition had the effect of wanting to challenge it on an intuitive level at a minimum but also more fundamentally at a cognitive – rational one. Enright et al.’s contention was that forgiveness is a gift (and many would agree), but something appeared to be missing for me that would help explain and accept it in that way. What I discovered was the absence of the underlying assumption that would support their view of seeing it as a gift – put another way, the very condition of possibility for forgiveness as gift was absent from the definition.

Recall that Robert Enright (1996, p.108) defined forgiveness as “a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge toward an offender who acts unjustly, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her,” and that the review questioned the notion of a right to resentment. In the act of forgiving an ‘other’ as it is with oneself, self-forgiveness, the first step is taken toward an abandonment of something more innately ingrained than one’s supposed rights to resentment, condemnation and subtle revenge as the literature suggests or negative feelings as North (1987) suggested in her definition.

Everett Worthington (1999a), in telling about the horrific circumstances learning that his mother has been brutally murdered, supports a perspective, which is more in line with the findings of this study. Worthington recalls the following...

“My brother’s voice was shaky. “I have some bad news,” he said.  
“Mama’s been murdered...”

Mama had been beaten to death with a crowbar, her body [sexually] assaulted with a wine bottle. Rage bubbled up in me like lava. I heard myself saying, “I’d like to have that murderer alone in a room with just a baseball bat. I’d beat his brains out...”

That night...I fought the bed covers. Rage and sadness had stolen sleep. Imagined scenes of violence and thoughts of hatred and revenge intruded. Ironically, only days before I had finished co-writing a book on forgiveness...Did I really believe what we had written about forgiveness—that empathy was a key to forgiving—or was that book just for other people? Could I empathize with the person who had murdered my mother?

I imagined how two youths might feel as they prepared to rob a darkened house. Perhaps they had been caught at a robbery previously. This time, though, they wouldn’t get caught. Standing in the street, they were, keyed up. The house was dark, no car in the driveway...They couldn’t know that Mama didn’t drive. A quick rap of the crowbar and they were in, emptying drawers, dumping the contents on the floor. I imagined the intruder’s shock when he heard a voice behind him. “What are you doing here?” Oh, no, he must have thought, I’ve been seen, I’ll go to jail. She’s ruining my life. He lashed out with the crowbar, slamming my mother three times. Panicked, the youths went crazy, trashing the

house, angry at having their plans ruined and overcome with the shame of having murdered.

I felt I understood better what had happened. The youth who murdered my mom did a terrible thing. Nothing will change that. Through empathy, I understood that he had lashed out in fear, surprise, guilt, and anger. My mind flashed back to hours earlier when I had talked about beating him to death with a baseball bat. I was willing to do what the youth did, only with more forethought, more naked malice than he.

“Whose heart is darker?” I almost said aloud. When I saw the evil I was capable of plotting, I was humbled. I saw my own guilt over plotting revenge. As a Christian, I knew that even as I confessed it, I would receive Divine forgiveness for my evil intent. I felt that forgiveness flood me. I knew that the youth, too, needed forgiveness. How could I withhold what the youth needed?

So, I forgave him, and I have since felt peace.

In my case, I worked through five steps up a Pyramid of Forgiveness, and I was able to forgive within a single night. Most of the time, it takes longer to forgive—sometimes years. Even though I was able to forgive quickly on that night, my forgiveness did not shorten my grief. For over a year afterward, I would periodically be overcome by grief. The blessing was that at least I did not have to deal with my own hatred and bitterness” (Worthington, 1999a, pp.30-31).

In further elaboration on his experience, Worthington relates:

“Blessedly, I was not left to wallow in the gooey stain of revenge, I recognized quickly that Jesus had died that I might have forgiveness and be washed clean of that stain. I thought, *if I have received forgiveness for the stain in my heart, then who am I to withhold forgiveness from this youth*. With that thought I released my desire for revenge, my bitterness, my desire to punitive justice. I forgave and paradoxically the chains that bound me to the youth in hatred fell from my heart and set us both free”. (Worthington, 1999b, p.14-15)

It is not the abandonment of Worthington’s right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge but his willingness to abandon his belief in a sedimented credo of an *eye for an eye* – that sets in motion a movement of retribution toward the offenders that murdered his mother. As Worthington stated through his rage, what he would have done to the murderer if he had him alone in a room is a confession of his belief in an eye for an eye retribution and it is not until he is able to abandon his right to this belief that he is

able to move toward the next phase of the forgiveness definition. Intuitively one does not abandon one's feelings but one does abandon one's beliefs – that is one's right to abandon one's cognitive thought processes, and not one's feelings. Once he was able to abandon his belief, he was ready to self-forgive as he so eloquently stated it. Once he was able to forgive himself – letting go of the anger and hatred he felt for another human being – he was ready to move to the third and final part of the forgiveness definition. At this point he would be able to foster the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward the offender.

The research supported this movement as well. For Max, the suspension of his belief in an eye for an eye retribution came when he discovered that his son was struggling with his life at home and that his actions were in reaction to his second wife, rather than directed at Max. In that instance, Max was working toward interpersonal forgiveness and learning to suspend his belief in an eye for an eye directed at himself. As Max stated, "...the turning point was when I found out that he was having a lot of difficulty with his wife, this woman and I guess well maybe it was not all his fault treating us the way he was treating us. He was doing it to try and make a go of it with his wife, his new wife. I guess I found out that it wasn't working out the way it should and when I found out in a way, I was sort of glad that he had a reason for doing what he was doing because I didn't think he had a reason before because we didn't do anything to him and...I thought his reasoning was he just wanted to be with his wife and he was taking her side and so the reasoning there was that he was taking care of her". In this way, Max abandoned his belief and was able to move toward the next phase in the forgiveness definition proposed here.

For Joyce, suspension came when she realized that to continue in her belief would eventually cost her life by self-destructing. As she said, “When I would be feeling badly, sobbing, sad, whatever it was, if I would go to self blame it upped the intensity to a whole new level. And part of it I think I did to feel badly...I felt like I deserved to feel that badly because of what I’ve done to my husband and his life and I think about what I did to his life...” Joyce stated that she “deserved” to feel as bad as she had imagined her husband and daughter to feel, *eye for an eye*. Her retribution was toward herself, which supports a comprehensive definition of forgiveness whether it is between others or directed toward oneself.

For Lois, this process was not quite as clear. However, she appeared to be struggling the most and continues to do so, which suggests that if one is unable to suspend their belief in an eye for an eye, then does that also prevent one from being able to forgive oneself or others? This highlights the use of the word ‘suspend’ versus ‘abandonment’ in the understanding of this key and critical concept in the process of self-forgiveness. The American Heritage Dictionary (1983) defines ‘abandonment’ as *giving up completely*, which has a permanent and fixed quality to its meaning. Whereas, suspend defined as *to bar for a period from a position*, certainly alludes to a more temporary status. The use of the word suspend accounts for the way in which individuals are able to forgive someone [or so s/he thought] and yet find her/himself not believing it when some event triggers a ‘relapse’ from the original offense. The supposition is that as long as one can suspend an eye for an eye then the path to self-forgiveness illuminates; however, if one is unable to hold the suspension then that path quickly disappears.



The idea of this concept has been popularized in the Disney movie – *Hook*, starring Robin Williams. In the movie, Williams portrays the fictional character Peter Pan, who in the beginning of the movie has forgotten who he really is and acts as an attorney. Once his character returns to “Never Never Land” in order to survive he must suspend his belief in being a lawyer and believe he is Peter Pan. As long as he can suspend his belief of being a lawyer, he can become Peter Pan and maintain all his magical powers but if he does not keep the suspension in place he becomes his ordinary self. And so it is with one’s suspension in the belief for an eye for an eye, one can begin to heal and transform through the pain and suffering, while failing to do so keeps one stuck and unhealthy.

It may very well be that those moments of return to an eye-for-eye narrative are inevitable inasmuch as it is the dominant cultural script. The implication is therefore that self-forgiveness is not entirely the responsibility of, or within the absolute control of, a self-contained and individual psyche. Perhaps if the cultural narrative was one that privileged forgiveness and not revenge, those self-recriminating lapses and the seemingly cyclical nature of self-forgiveness, characterized by a back and forth, would be considerably less – would allow more of an “abandonment” than a “suspension”. The sad paradox, of course, is that this eye for an eye belief keeps one separated from the human community, and holding onto the belief validates the self-punishment that the research participants endured. As long as they held the belief, the self-punishment was justified. It was not until the belief was suspended that the punishment subsided. Each research participant took years to work through their issues before coming to a tenuous peace with their choices. It would seem that suspending the belief in an eye for an eye is

very difficult and can take a very long time, but it definitely appears worth it for renewed health and well being.

Similarly, inasmuch as there is fear involved in journeying toward self-forgiveness, one may understand this fear in two ways. On the one hand, one's reluctance to abandon this belief may be based in fear, the fear of the unknown, which can also equate into a fear of forgiving. The typical human response behind fear has been described in terms of the fight or flight syndrome. When one is wronged, one can fight back or one can flee. For Joyce, alcohol was used at first to flee from herself and to try and numb the pain. As she stated, "I used alcohol for a while. Yeah, I drank, I mean not to the point of drunk and not even a lot in amount but I was consciously choosing alcohol as soon as I walked in the door I drank alcohol. It numbed me like that [Joyce snapped her fingers]. So, I did that for months..." The fear involved in forgiving is about coming to terms with the unknown. The unknown leaves one questioning whether by forgiving one could expect the offense to happen again or that one will hurt a loved one again or break a promise to a loved one or say something out of anger as the research indicated. The fear takes center stage and stays with a person as long as they continue to replay the experience cognitively again and again and may be the glue that holds the belief in place. Lois spoke about being contained by the fear and not allowing her any relief. She said, "but to truly not to think about it *every single day* [pause] I would say maybe 10 years I wrestled back and forth, cried over it..." As the tape replays for Lois, she reinforces her belief in an eye for an eye; why shouldn't she be held accountable for breaking her promise to her sister and the fear kept her bound to her failure to keep her word with her sister. What if she had been able to face her fear earlier and abandon the belief in an eye

for an eye; the result would be different, possibly the healing would have come about sooner.

On the other hand, this fear may not be entirely of the individual's making. To adopt a position or stance so out of keeping with what is "normal" or usual within the broader culture; to persist in abandoning a vengeful attitude amidst others – often loved others – who propose or argue for precisely that retributive response, is fearful, not by one's own making, but by one's experience in the everyday.

Once the authority of an eye for an eye has been suspended, one can move toward releasing the feelings of condemnation, resentment, and subtle revenge that one feels about oneself. This comes from being able to re-author or redefine the past and the meaning the events hold for the person. This also highlights how self-forgiveness is relational. Lois explained that the process she took to redefine the events took a long time and that she relied on her faith – her relationship with God to help her translate the events into a meaning that she could live with and be at peace. She stated, "I just think through evaluating, through going back over the situation, reflecting through faith that I've been able to put it to rest and say, that it was ok that I wasn't there, that you know, I wasn't probably meant to be there.."

Joyce sought help outside herself, again highlighting the relational aspect of self-forgiveness, to redefine the events that transpired based on her choice to leave her husband and expose her daughter to a non-traditional lifestyle. Speaking to the relational aspect of self-forgiveness she says, "it's relational with the people that you feel like you're hurting, it's relational in your support group or lack thereof, professional help even relationships at work...So it's relational in a point that you are...I am choosing who

to have relationships with based on who can support my self-forgiveness and not take me back to question myself or be critical of myself. So, it's relational in every way..."

Joyce's *redefining* moment came when she was able to adopt a personal philosophy that would allow her to accept that her sexual preference was not a choice. The events surrounding her revelation remained the same but the meaning she was able to bring to them changed, thus granting her permission to a new perspective. She said, "a *huge* piece is what I've come to believe and it's obviously just a personal philosophy and that is that same sex preferences, the preference is not a choice. So that's been the biggest piece, is coming to that, but that took a couple of years..."

For Max, the redefining came about when he was able to view his son in a different light, from a different perspective. He said, "I never realized that he had a good reason from his standpoint to not want to reconcile with us because he did not want to tell me he was still trying to make a go of it with his wife..." Max had not been privy to the private affairs of his son, which basically blinded him to accepting what was happening. As Max pursued his eye for an eye belief he learned what Mahatma Gandhi meant from his quote that: "*An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind.*" Once Max was able to abandon that belief, he was able to move toward releasing the negative feelings he was experiencing as manifested in his inability to sleep. Max said, "If you have a problem and you determine it was a problem and you don't want it to happen in your life again, you learn by experience not to let that get to you, get the best of you... from that standpoint with my son and family, I can sleep much better..."

Joyce realized the importance of being able to "let go" of those negative feelings that were detrimental to her existence. She recalled, "the angst of figuring out who in the

world I was that absolute pain like I never felt before of the loss of all that husband, family, time with my daughter, all of that lifestyle, huge piece, to between feeling that loss and that struggle about my own sexuality and who I was I was going to self destruct if I didn't let go of something..."

Understanding self-forgiveness in this way lends itself to extrapolating it to the broader concept of forgiveness, that is forgiving an other. The definition proposed here would form the basis of a definition for interpersonal forgiveness, which is between two parties. The research proposes to suggest that forgiveness of an offender always begins with self-forgiveness. In other words, one cannot forgive another without first forgiving oneself and self-forgiveness will always be *a priori*; otherwise, it is not forgiveness but something else.

Once one has let go of her/his feelings of resentment, condemnation and subtle revenge toward the offender (in the case of self-forgiveness, the self), then one can begin to foster the supposedly undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward oneself. As Joyce explained, "I guess physically it's kind of a whole package because along with self-forgiveness was self-care. So, you know, I now take better care of myself, so I feel better just based on what comes with taking better care of yourself. Exercise has always been my...mental health and I didn't for about two years that was miserable for my body...so now just that I'm back in getting into a routine and taking care of myself I just feel better physically..." Joyce described it as taking better care of herself through physical exercise and self-care. It is learning to be kinder and gentler toward oneself. It is at this point, that the definition speaks to the spiritual dimension of self-forgiveness. Lois said, "It has to be within you either a feeling, you have to feel it

within yourself now whether that's spiritual or not, I'm not sure. But I would think that at some point, it has to be, your spirit is within you, it has to be within you....” Lois refers to it as a spiritual healing through a coming to peace with one's decision.

### Challenging the Literature

The research results have indicated a new definition for forgiveness. Forgiveness is defined as a willingness to abandon one's belief (or one's right to believe) in an eye for an eye credence of retribution towards an offender who has acted unjustly, followed by an acknowledgment that one must first release feelings of condemnation, resentment and subtle revenge towards the offender before one can foster the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love towards the offender. Comparing this definition with those previously discussed, it becomes clearer that there were underlying assumptions being made that were never adequately explained. For Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991), their definition of forgiveness starts with an 'I' as a self-contained entity unto itself versus this definition of beginning with the 'other'. The implications of this shift from 'I' to 'other' opens the possibility of discovering the relational aspect of forgiveness in the context of drawing closer to the divine Other (which may include, but is not limited to, the otherness of a deity), thus, disavowing the ego as separate. Without viewing the ego as separate, this challenges the very foundations upon which all previous scientific and empirical study on forgiveness has been situated. It is in the 'other' that one is granted access to forgiveness and not within oneself. Forgiveness no longer needs to be seen as a gift (or rather, a certain kind of gift) and that raises a very interesting question – if not, then what? Possibly, it could

be the purest of gifts: if a gift is one that is given selflessly, without acknowledgment, without even the self acknowledging the gift as a gift, in essence one comes closest to the purest sense of a gift, which is, of course, an impossibility. It is not the purpose of this research to answer that question but to propose it for future considerations.

McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) defined forgiveness as a set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the offending person and again they did not address what does it take for one to become motivated? The answer lies again in abandoning the belief in an eye for an eye retribution. Therein lies the catalyst to become motivated, as long as one is willing to hold on tight to that credence then one remains estranged from the offender. They use the word “transformation” to describe the action that takes place when one no longer maintains estrangement but begins to pursue a move towards the other. The transformation comes about when one no longer believes she/he has the right to that kind of retribution.

Hargrave and Sells (1997) used the words “destructive entitlement” in their definition, which supports their belief in the credo and how it prevents efforts at restoring love and trust back into relationships. Ciaramicoli and Ketcham (2000) had argued that empathy was the starting point for forgiveness but as has been demonstrated, they too were incorrect in how and what one must begin with in order to embark upon the journey of forgiving.

The empirical self-forgiveness literature echoed much of the same methodology of what was said in the forgiveness literature, once again assuming an ‘I’ stance as the way to approach presenting a definition. Bauer et al.’s (1992) phenomenological

approach offered a descriptive ‘feel’ to the essence of what is being proposed. They state, “a shift from fundamental estrangement to being at home with one’s self...(p. 153)”, acknowledging the abandonment of the belief through the cessation of self-punishment, such that it is no longer necessary. They go on to say, “This at-homeness involves a change in one’s identity which simultaneously *feels* (emphasis added) very new and very familiar, as if recognizing for the first time someone who has always been there...(p. 153)” Feeling new and familiar strikes a cord with Ghandi’s point of being blinded when one holds onto an eye for an eye, releasing it allows one to ‘see’ oneself again, which marks the “familiar” quality that Bauer et al.’s research alluded toward. Their definition continues by affirming the acknowledgement of the need to let go of negative feelings – “One moves from an attitude of judgment to embracing who one is...(p. 153)” It is this moment that one recognizes that one is capable of having strong negative feelings about oneself but is not how one chooses to define oneself. Instead, there is an acceptance and not a judgment with a move toward fostering care for the self as they describe as a “connectedness” to humanity, which ultimately leads to the Divine.

### **Conclusions**

While the number of research studies surrounding forgiveness continues to grow, it is the hope of these findings that new understandings will emerge that make the topic of forgiveness and self-forgiveness more readily accessible for those in need of such a healing and for those interested in further developing their knowledge base of such a courageous journey. I never would have imagined that the research would have led me onto the path of understanding that I developed while exposing myself to the various literatures, people and stories I encountered. The journey on the path of self-forgiveness



is long and arduous. It takes an emotional toll and requires resilience and perseverance to maintain one's footing. The implications set forth by these discoveries appear to touch many aspects of our existence. It has brought the Divine within one's grasp and made it more readily available. Learning to accept forgiveness as disposing of something one did not want to begin with – for example: anger, resentments, revenge – and having something of value returned – one's sense of wholeness and health for example, might just make someone choose to forgive rather than hold onto feelings that will ultimately be detrimental to one's health and well being. This way of learning to understand forgiveness reaches far beyond the doors of a psychology dissertation and possibly into the rooms of theology, religion and interpersonal relationships. It may help dissolve psychology's distant stance and allow it to become more of a therapeutic intervention when a client is in need of healing that forgiveness may offer.

The offering of a new definition may birth the possibilities of exploring how we can learn to remove or loosen the grip an eye for an eye credence of retribution that has held us captive for far too long. The implications of its removal appear astounding. If one no longer believes in this right, how much easier will one learn or embrace the journey to self-forgive or forgive others? The implications reach far into the therapeutic realm as well. This credence is visible in all addictions, depressions, marital conflicts, self-sabotaging behaviors, as one only has to listen for it. The credence affects our culture and society and is reinforced daily not only from political leaders but to our entertainment values as well. One can only imagine how different history would have been written if the United States Government had chosen to respond to 9/11 with forgiveness.

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## Appendix I

# DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

**TITLE:** A hermeneutic study of self-forgiveness

**INVESTIGATOR:** John Beiter  
162 Virginia Avenue, #2  
Mount Washington, PA 15211  
Cell 412-398-7383  
beiterjw@aol.com

**ADVISOR:** Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.  
Psychology Department  
412-396-6520

**SOURCE OF SUPPORT:** This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Duquesne University.

**PURPOSE:** You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the meaning and experience of self-forgiveness. Participants will be interviewed and the interviews audiotaped by the researcher about experiences of self-forgiveness in order to come to a fuller understanding of the process and dynamics thereof. The interviews will be held in the confidential offices of the researcher at 200 Cedar Ridge Road, Suite 208, Pittsburgh, PA 15205 or at a place chosen by the participant. Participants will be asked to schedule a mutually agreeable time to meet for a minimum of two hours with a follow up interview of one hour to discuss the researcher's interpretation of the conversation. The interviews will be taped and transcribed. These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** Participation in this research may provoke emotional reactions. These reactions may be painful, but may also lead to a fuller

appreciation and understanding of life experiences. The researcher will assist the participant in managing such incidents should it occur and suggest appropriate counseling referrals if the participant deems necessary.

**COMPENSATION:** There is to be no compensation.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** When the audiotapes are transcribed all identifiers of subjects and anyone subject talks about will be deleted. A transcriber will be employed and required to sign an affidavit of confidentiality. The audiotapes and consent form will be kept in a locked facility, which only I, the researcher, will have access.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time and have your data removed along with it should you chose.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call John Beiter at (412) 398-7383 and/or Dr. Paul Richer, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board (412-396-6326).

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date



## Appendix II

JB: How would you define self-forgiveness?

Lois: Self-forgiveness, umm, I think it means being able to live with something that really bothered you for a long time and really be able to put it to rest and not worry about it anymore, would be what self-forgiveness means to me.

JB: Ok, thank you. Please tell me your story and help me understand your experience of self-forgiveness.

Lois: Ok...and I hope I don't cry with the story. But the one thing that has bothered me for many years, years [pause] is that...I was not with my sister when she died, [crying] and...the night before she died I was going to visit her and I was really tired and I didn't go [pause] but I had two hours the next morning before work, I went in at noon, and so those few hours I was going to get up early and go to the hospital, visit her and then go to work and before I could get there she died. And all through the time that she was ill, we always made sure she was never alone because she was so frightened and...nobody was with her when she died even though we had somebody around the clock. We took shifts...nobody was there. And...I've just really struggled with that. You know, with the fact that maybe I should've spent more time than I did...so it's very hard to live with. And so now I can live with it even though I am sitting here blubbing [forcing a smile through her tears] umm [pause] but it's been through [pause] a lot of reflection on the whole entire situation...through faith...reading of the Bible...and coming to an

understanding of my faith that I have been able to say it was ok...that I wasn't meant to be there. I don't know what else you want to know. [pause] But, you know I went to church before when [pause] but I never really understood why I went and...I think after her passing and what not and struggling to figure all that out that through faith I have learned that what going to church was all about and...how to forgive myself for not being with her.

[At this point, Lois motioned for me to turn off the recorder so that she could get Kleenex and compose herself. She had remained tearful throughout her last dialogue. At this point, the researcher compassionately inquired and Lois was almost apologetic because of her emotional response to the telling of her story. She said she wanted to continue and we resumed. ]

JB: When your sister died, did you feel you had done something wrong? And how long after her death did you feel it?

Lois: Yes, I felt that [pause] I let her down by not being there with her because we said there would always be somebody there with you and to that point, you know, to that point that was our way of life, you know, I'd go to work, I'd come home, I'd go to the hospital or I'd go to work, I'd go take my mother to the hospital, and her husband was there, her mother-in-law was there, I was there...that was our way of life, what we promised her was that we would always be there and...even though her mother-in-law was there that morning, she had stepped out to get coffee and in that amount of time she died and...so

yeah, I felt that I let her down by not being there...or I missed my last chance maybe to be with her, while she was still here.

JB: And how long ago was this?

Lois: My sister has been gone for 18 years. And...I bet it's taken 15 of those years [Lois started tearing up struggling with her words] to say it's ok, because it was just something I just couldn't deal with. But I just think through evaluating, through going back over the situation, reflecting through faith that I've been able to put it to rest and say, that it was ok that I wasn't there, that you know, I wasn't probably meant to be there.

JB: When did you finally come to that realization? Was it at the end of the 15 years?

Lois: Well, maybe I realized that a little sooner than that, maybe it wasn't 15 years, maybe, you know, I think I came to a realization...but to truly not to think about it every single day [pause] I would say maybe 10 years I wrestled back and forth, cried over it, talked about it...and probably slowly come to the realization that it was ok but really it has been, I'm telling you recently 15 years at least before I have finally said that this is ok, it's ok, it's alright you know...took me a long time.

JB: Can you tell me what happened during that time. Did you feel like you were making progress all during that time?

Lois: Yeah, I think there were moments or times when I could think about it and maybe I would say 'ok this is it, we're not going to dwell on this anymore, we're not going to think about this in this way anymore, we're just gonna say it's alright and then umm, like something about her could come back, I..I'd just have a thought of her and it will all come back again [her eyes are welling with tears] and...I put it to rest one more time, you know...but those times when I think about her now, or the date of her death comes around I can deal with it better now than I did before.

JB: It sounds like it has been a gradual thing.

Lois: Yeah, it's been a gradual thing.

JB: Was it deliberate?

Lois: Did I have to work on it? Yes, yes...umm, and I think that the reason it has taken so long is because her children are in my life, and when I am with them I think about – Wow! – these are my sister's kids and it's just that they're always a reminder of her and now her oldest daughter and her baby that would be my sister's grandbaby, I just have been thinking a lot about her lately because of the baby, but I'm ok with it. It's not like it was before when I would...even though I am crying today...it's not like I don't break down...I don't dwell on it as much as I did. So I would say it is like two steps forward and one step back and it has been a gradual process but I think I'm there.

JB: How do you know?

Lois: Umm, just through...probably because I handle it much better than I did before, that's one way I know. I think there our times I've learned that sometimes people hang on because you are there, maybe that was her opportunity to leave because she needed to and if we weren't always there she would have gone sooner [becoming tearful].

[Researcher asked if she wanted a break and she accepted.]

JB: I am not sure if you define self-forgiveness as a journey, but is there a destination to it or does it continue, is it never ending?

Lois: I do think it is a journey, I think it's a process in which you learn to live with it and...I think I am at a place where I could say that I am at peace with it, that I understand now that I really wasn't supposed to be there and that maybe it was her way of leaving with nobody there and maybe it was more comfortable for her and I think now I can really say that but I won't say that I never go back and relive it, I do, I do go back over it, I do think about it but I feel better about it. I will say I am at peace at it, with it, just through my understanding of [pause] or through the reflection on it, thinking of it and learning through faith that there was a reason that she passed and we were not there.

JB: Is part of that journey learning an answer to that reason?

Lois: Yeah, I would say that, I would say that. I think what I found out in life is that everybody is here for a specific reason, everybody has a path they need to follow, and from her life I think I learned some very good lessons from and...I can't explain. [pause] I think I'm ok from learning the lessons I learned from her and I think realizing that there was something to learn gives me peace.

JB: So that would be part of the journey, that there is something you need to learn?

Lois: Yes, but I did not know that at the time and I think through the years you finally come to that understanding and I think from her I learned how to live my life better.

JB: Can you speak to how you felt in the beginning versus how you feel now? How can you feel it differently now?

Lois: I was always angry, I think? I would...there were a lot of times I'd come home and if I were alone, I would just cry, I would holler at God, I would talk to him and I would get mad and ask him why? Why? Why? And I think through studying the Bible, through my faith that I've learned why...and how since we're supposed to be and so now when I think about it I do kind of thank God that she is and was he giving peace and I can accept that now. Earlier on, there was no acceptance, there was no reason, I couldn't understand why she even had to die, why she had to go through what she had to go through. I just couldn't grasp it. She was definitely here for a reason. She was definitely here to teach a lesson.

JB: Was there any pivotal point upon the journey, I know you said it was gradual but was there any pivotal point where you really felt like, yeah I'm really making some progress?

Lois: I would maybe when I had children, because I could relate to how she felt about her children. When you don't have kids you don't have that feeling towards kids. And I think I could compare some of the things she was trying to tell me to the things that I was feeling. So I think through the raising of my kids and how she raised her kids there was just something, she was helping me even though she wasn't here. I just felt that she was helping me by the way she handled her children. And now I can understand...and so it just seemed like she wasn't here but I was learning from her and so maybe I don't know...maybe I could be more at...because I felt her with me that I could finally feel that she was ok? It was ok that I wasn't there.

JB: What do think your sister was trying to teach you?

Lois: She was very practical. She was a very practical kind of person and maybe because having children and what not that I began thinking more like her...maybe I recognized that and I think that being there for her kids as they got older...and we didn't have to go through the Dad and all this and that, being with them and answering a lot of their questions they had that they weren't sure about when they were younger...I think that helped me to deal with it. Like the youngest for instance, never knew her Mom well.

The only way she remembers her is as bald and real frail. We were going through photo albums one day and she said “Who’s this?” It was my sister and she just didn’t recognize her and so I was able and have been able to help them with those sorts of things. Maybe I understand now is what my job is – for her kids to be here to help them.

JB: Will this journey be something that you perpetuate?

Lois: Probably, now that I really think about it, probably. It will be something that goes on...and probably because of the contact with her kids. I do want to be there for them, let them know what she was like and if they have any questions about her I want to be able to help answer them. And now with her oldest daughter’s baby, I want to be there because her mother can’t be there. So, now maybe I’m doing what I was meant to do for them.

JB: How would you describe the journey?

Lois: I would think that it has been difficult. There have been good times but with all the kids and their issues...that’s the difficult part, because you can’t jump in their lives and you can’t change it for them, can’t make things better for them, they have got to do that and sitting back and watching them make their mistakes is difficult. The only thing I can do is when they ask me I can give them my feelings and pray for them. That’s the biggest thing, that’s all I can do.



JB: You've mentioned faith and prayer a lot, where would you locate self-forgiveness in the world?

Lois: It has to be within you either a feeling, you have to feel it within yourself now whether that's spiritual or not, I'm not sure. But I would think that at some point, it has to be, your spirit is within you, it has to be within you. It's definitely not something you are going to go out and buy or see; it has to be within you. I think self-forgiveness means being able to say that I did the best that I could or did what I thought was right at that time and being able to say that it's ok and live with it without thinking about it everyday and wondering what you could have changed.

JB: When you said you could feel it, can you locate it in your body as to how you experienced it?

Lois: I would say in my heart or in my mind. I would say that you feel that a load has been lifted and it is both physically and mentally. You would just feel better.

JB: How do think your life would have been different if you had been there when your sister took her last breath?

Lois: I just felt that I would have been there to comfort her. I guess, I wanted to know that she went in peace and I'm not sure if she went in peace. I don't know how my life would be different. I would have kept my promise that I was there for her.

JB: Now that we are nearing the end of our interview, how does it feel to have told your story?

Lois: In talking with you about my sister, it brought back a lot of feelings of missing her. It also made me realize that she left us when she needed to and that was something only she could do. She did not need me. I didn't think I would cry so much when talking about her. Maybe I was keeping more inside than I realized. I did feel as though a weight was lifted after sharing this with you.

## Appendix III

JB: Thanks for agreeing to participate in my study. I really appreciate it. First question I wanted to ask you, how would you define self-forgiveness?

Max: Well, I would guess that I would say is that self-forgiveness becomes present when after you feel that you have treated someone poorly and maybe you shouldn't have. And after a while you feel there is no hope for making amends and you somehow or other you have to forgive yourself seeing or doing some things that you did that you felt that you did in the past that you shouldn't have done.

JB: Thank you. Now what I'd like you to do is tell me your story of self-forgiveness. How did it start?

Max: My oldest son, happened to what I felt treated myself and my wife very poorly because we were living in South Carolina at the time and my son had got a divorce from his first wife and whom we liked a lot and he married this other gal, I think on the rebound and she is a person that did not like us at all and showed animosity toward us and well, what really made me get upset with my son was when my second son was living in New York, he was having his first baby and was coming to Canonsburg in our local area to have a family get together and a Christening for his baby in his local home town, well he came from New York to Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. We came from South Carolina and my daughter came from Michigan and we all met at a hotel in Pittsburgh

and a lot of the relations were going to be there from the Canonsburg area and it so happened that he did not invite us at all to his house, he has a big house, big four bedroom home, where he could have easily accommodated all of the family at least for a get-together, not necessarily all of our relations, just immediate family, a couple of children, my wife and I, my daughter's children and my other son's children for a quick get together but I guess he might have been having problems with his wife so we met at the hotel and where we had dinner with all of the relatives but we started to talk about, I could not understand why he made no effort whatsoever to say to come over to his house and visit and invite any of us over. We were all going to stay at the hotel and he was just going to come here and say hello and leave but that upset me and I said, I could not understand why you did it, in fact you are not part of the family as far as I'm concerned and you're no son of mine if we can't travel all of this distance and don't even want to invite us over to your house. We are all from out of town and we have to stay at a hotel. So that is what upset me and I guess I said it out of anger because I was very angry and really the biggest part of it too was my wife would cry to me about how we should, she kept saying how disappointed she was in him, how could he do this to us, and she couldn't understand it and neither could I and I decided to tell him you are no son of mine and that I could never forgive him for doing that kind of thing so he left and I guess it was a very trying time and of course I didn't sleep for months thinking about it. It was tough.

JB: When you said, "you're no son of mine" where did you say it and who heard you say that?

Max: I blurted it out in front of a number of people including his daughter who started crying and my grand-daughter heard it and I think she was upset too that my son didn't invite us over but again I shouldn't have said that. She heard and a couple of other people were there, I don't know who. It was a very trying thing but I feel like I shouldn't have said it but in anger you say things that you would like to take back later on.

JB: How long do you think it took you to forgive yourself?

Max: Oh, it was tough. Like I said, I couldn't sleep for many nights, just lay awake thinking about it and maybe a year, a year and a half. I don't know if I really did forgive myself until later on when I saw him we were...we saw him at a Christmas party one time, my wife's brother, and it was a cool reception, I talked to him but I didn't say much to him and it was very trying time. I knew I shouldn't have said it and at the time I realized he was under pressure. He married this girl rather hurriedly on the rebound from his other wife so when he did that this woman was what I considered later on and proved later on is a gold digger. She just wanted someone to take care of her and put her kids through college and she was giving him a hard time right along but I didn't know it. They were having problems with each other but I was totally unaware of it because he was sticking by his wife you know. If you leave your family you got to, your wife comes first after you leave your family and he was I think, he was always a good kid prior to that but this woman brought out the worst in him, when I say worst in him I mean that he just didn't want to have anything to do with us, he didn't make himself available to us

when we couldn't hear from him, we'd hear from the others, we'd ask them how is my son doing, and nothing's changed. I had a lot of sleepless nights and I'm sure it didn't do my health any good or my wife's, both of us were very upset and I think the reason I was more upset is because my wife was upset. I knew that she was maybe a bit more upset than I was but I saw what kind of condition she was in and I think it played on my nerves and that's why I blurted out at him the way I did but I shouldn't have done it.

JB: What was the turning point for you to say, "I think I need to forgive myself?"

Max: Well, the turning point was when I found out that he was having a lot of difficulty with his wife, this woman and I guess well maybe it was not all his fault treating us the way he was treating us. He was doing it to try and make a go of it with his wife, his new wife. I guess I found out that it wasn't working out the way it should and when I found out in a way, I was sort of glad that he had a reason for doing what he was doing because I didn't think he had a reason before because we didn't do anything to him and I think he reasoning, I thought his reasoning was he just wanted to be with his wife and he was taking her side and so the reasoning there was that he was taking care of her. She was, but when I found out that he was in trouble just like we were she was giving us a hard time but by the same token she was giving him a hard time and it was going to be a breakup. She was spending a lot of his money and taking care of her kids. She had two kids that he was taking care of and his two kids which he would see periodically and his daughter was living with the two girls a little while but his wife was treating her daughters with respect and buying them all kinds of things and the rules were for my

son's daughter but they didn't apply to her daughters. She eventually saw that and that she was spending money on her daughters and not my son's daughter so she finally left and went on her own and went back to her mother's place. And we heard a little bit of that from his daughter so as a result I felt that I was overwhelming distraught at myself for getting mad at my son. I felt that I should tell him as such and I should. I did forgive him. I guess you could say it was emotional, too. I tried to forgive myself for doing that because I think I had to so I eventually could forgive him.

JB: What was helpful in helping you forgive yourself?

Max: Well, I saw somebody that I felt was very professional, in fact was professional, I had a talk with and it just so happens he mentioned that you have to forgive yourself before you can forgive him and this helped me along a lot.

JB: So part of the journey of self-forgiveness involves help from someone else?

Max: I just happened to ask for help in a way and my wife said that we should probably talk to someone and so as a result we saw someone and I felt after a session or so I had to confront him and say that I did forgive him and I'm extremely sorry I said what I said and I told him that it was in anger and it should not have been and I asked for his forgiveness.

JB: And how did that meeting go?

Max: It went very well.

JB: Was he surprised?

Max: He said he was sorry but he could understand. He was very understanding from that standpoint because he said these things were happening to him that he could not let me know about. He said that he did everything in his power to try...he thought that his first marriage could have been a failure because his wife, his first wife after 15 or so many years she is the one that wanted a divorce and he was more in spending all of his time in making money and making a good livelihood for his family, his two children and his wife but evidently he felt in his own mind she got a divorce because he did not spend enough time with her and he thought he was doing something wrong so he felt that he had to redefine his future by doing whatever he could for this woman, his second wife and he didn't want to lead to another divorce. So he jumped in with both feet with this girl, this new wife, and he was vulnerable and she took advantage of it and he, I could see that he was suffering to and right before we had to get together I could see that he was suffering a lot internally but he could not see his way clear and telling me these things. I had to find out for myself and from my other son who knew a lot of these problems were existing between him and this new wife but he could not tell because his only brother didn't want him to say anything.

JB: How much time passed between the first event when you disowned him and you forgave him?



Max: A couple of years. It happened a while back, well we were still living in South Carolina so I didn't see him much and he was living in Pennsylvania and we didn't get much chance to see what was going on but your first born you always have a, you always want to know what they are doing and want to see what is happening with them. He was always a good kid. I had three good children and I was always proud of them and even to this day after we reconciled I am still proud of all three of them because they have all made a success of their life and I feel that along the way we contributed quite a bit and their satisfaction in life.

JB: Now can you mark the day that you said this is the day that I forgave myself?

Max: No, I think it was sort of a slow process really because I would say that yes, I'm sorry and then I would say why in the hell did he do that? He should have known better and he and then I'd go back and say, "Damn it, he should have known better". But then I never realized that he had a good reason from his standpoint to not want to reconcile with us because he did not want to tell me he was still trying to make a go of it with his wife.

JB: When you look back on it, do you feel different about it?

Max: Actually, I feel as though I want to treat him with total respect as he does me and I never demanded respect but I think he gives that respect to me and I show that respect to him as to all of my children. You get up in years and we don't have many more years

to go and I want them to realize that their Dad loved them through thick and thin. There was some trying times there that he went through and I went through. Thank goodness I don't have it with my other two children and I think I would never want it to happen with any of them anymore and particularly I don't think it would have to occur, not at this stage of life.

JB: Do you experience self-forgiveness as a process and does it still go on?

Max: Yes, you have to think about, it's a learning experience, over the years of your life you learn through trial and error and you got to take some of the good with the bad and if you did something bad once you try not to repeat it again. If you have a problem and you determine it was a problem and you don't want it to happen in your life again, you learn by experience not to let that get to you, get the best of you.

JB: How does it feel now that you've embarked on this journey of self-forgiveness? Would you say it improved your health?

Max: Yes, from that standpoint with my son and family, I can sleep much better. Other things might crop up that keep you awake and so forth, but I think I'm at peace now with my family and my children that I hope that I have left some mark in their life that maybe they will see where I went wrong maybe and they will learn from seeing what I did wrong in my experience to brighten their life so they don't make the same mistakes that I

did and I would hope that they would see that in the future. Dad may have done some wrong things in the past, but he tried to correct them and make them right.

JB: How do you feel now that you have experienced self-forgiveness and where in your body would you locate the feelings?

Max: I felt relieved, yes. You might say a heavy burden was off my mind, was off my chest, was off my heart really, but I started being happy again. There were other times that I was thinking about him often and wondering where did I go wrong that he elected to do what he did but then I could understand now why he had the problem but after reconciling with him I felt that he understood and I understood and it was a load off of my mind. Hopefully, he has learned from that too and we are much closer now than we were before I think.

JB: Was there anything else that helped you on the process of self-forgiveness?

Max: Well, I prayed a lot and I was wondering if there was really a Lord cause I prayed a lot and all those years it was trying and we'd go to church and I would sit there and pray and there are many passages in the Bible on that you are supposed to turn the cheek, forgive one another, turn the other cheek when someone slaps you, various passages and we never miss church down in South Carolina. I found myself many times praying with tears in my eyes when I thought I was not going to get my son back. (His eyes filled with tears.)

JB: Talk about those tears. What were you feeling?

Max: Well, the world is caving in on me and what did we do to deserve at this stage in life after we felt that all of the children left the nest and we thought they were doing well and then we get up in years and our oldest son, practically abandoned you. I felt actually that the Lord was abandoning me cause we thought we did nothing whatsoever to justify this type of you might say, not anger from him, this type of lifestyle from him and we were up in years and we wanted to make our last years with happiness and this was a very trying time. We thought we were going to church, we were doing everything we thought was right and then, we thought, I thought, that the Lord abandoned us. So we didn't have any, I started having my doubts whether a prayer would do any good for you or not.

JB: And how do you feel about it now?

Max: Well, I think that maybe finally, the Lord did hear me but maybe all of that prayer did not go for not and eventually I guess I seemed kind of weak, like it says we are all weak soles at time. You get kind of weak and you forget, things aren't happening and I guess you got to realize that the Lord can't change things over night. You got to continue to keep praying that something is going to happen to come back to where it was before so I kept doing that and it did take a while but eventually it happened.

JB: So if I hear you right, there is a spiritual dimension to self forgiveness?

Max: Oh, absolutely even if you feel that, I guess if you feel like you are being abandoned you got to, like the old cliché, you got to hang in there and things aren't going to happen over night. I guess the Lord doesn't answer everybody promptly as he could. I guess there is no way he is going to say Okay, things are going to change over night. You just got to keep, when things aren't working out, you got to keep praying that things will work out for the better.

JB: Would you say that your faith has been restored?

Max: Yes, but it is still weak at times because I keep praying for things to happen that don't and I guess that it did in that experience with my son, you just got to keep praying enough, and do the right thing and live by your religion and believe strongly in it that eventually things should work out.

JB: Would it be safe to say that as you were further along on your journey of self-forgiveness that it helped strengthen your faith?

Max: Yes, very much so. It took a lot of years and kept a lot of years and a lot of praying and I would say even though I did a lot of praying I would question him, why aren't you hearing me, why aren't you doing something? What am I doing wrong to deserve this? And to deserve more answers from you might say that things kept going on in this way without any improvement until eventually it did work out.

JB: How is it that you would call what you experienced self-forgiveness as opposed to anything else?

Max: Well, I guess you would have to say that you got to believe in yourself and believe in the religious life, believe in the Lord, you have to I guess forgive yourself before you can forgive anybody else. You tell yourself, I'm sorry, yes, I'm sorry what I did, and you get to tell the persons who you had problems with and tell them that you are sorry and whenever you tell them face to face or clear your mind out of satisfy, they are satisfied that you are telling them that you forgive them and to hear them that they say it is okay. They understood why you were feeling the way you were. That in essence makes you feel better.

JB: Now that we are nearing the end of our interview, how does it feel to have told your story?

Max: I actually feel weak, I feel that I've been drained but yet I feel good about it. I feel very weak, but I feel good that things have come to pass the way they did.

## Appendix IV

JB: How do you define self-forgiveness?

Joyce: Do I have time to think about that?

JB: Sure, take your time.

Joyce: [Pause 22 seconds] I guess self-forgiveness to me means not taking responsibility or blame for another person's hurt or pain that I feel that I have caused. If I cannot feel responsible for that, that seems like self-forgiveness to me.

JB: Please tell me your story of self-forgiveness.

Joyce: Ok, I will start with the overall situation and how that came about. So, the areas where I felt responsible for other people's pain and hurt in which I had to work on self-forgiveness were toward breaking the vows of my marriage to my husband and umm inflicting, a little severe of a word but, inflicting umm a non traditional life style on my daughter. So the backup part of this is; I had been married for ten years, we'd been together 13 years. I can remember saying often to people I love my life, I love my life, I love my life [Note: Joyce sings these words.] I love my husband, I love my daughter...the full situation. It was great. Umm, we celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary, went away for a weekend that was good. Prior to that probably a year or

two I had returned to graduate school. So it's the first time I'd been not doing a stay home Mom role and I was back out in the world of adults. So I was doing some internships was working with adults and my husband had always been somewhat of a workaholic. So as I started to work more, there's started to be a little bit more difficulty at home because I didn't have the time to fill in the gaps. So there started to be a little bit more stress, a little bit more tension. I attributed it to two working parents, just kind of general. There were issues that existed in our marriage, he always put himself first, that's just the way it was and he worked a lot. I figured that was ok because I wasn't working so that was something I should be able to live with. And we had something we had an issue in which I had a problem with. I felt that he had intellectual arrogance, in terms of feeling he was intellectually superior to other people and treated them that way. Now the reality is that he probably was but...treating other people that way was the part that bothered me. So I'm only telling you this so you can see what issues are in the marriage that currently existed. To me things that probably could have been worked on and been resolved or at least we would have been able to address them, ok. So that being said about the marriage, I then did an internship, well no let me back up. In one of my graduate classes, I had a female professor. I knew she was gay, she had a partner and that was that. But, I started to have these feelings like a crush on a woman, never had had that before. I told my husband about it, we laughed about it and that was that, ok. Told a girlfriend about it and we just figured it was just this little thing, no big deal, so that was that. Then I had another internship and at this internship, I made a friend whose name was {deleted}, also gay and she had a partner too. Well, we became friends and we became closer friends and then what started to happen was I started to have feelings



toward her that I hadn't had before. So I felt an emotional connection with her I hadn't felt before, umm, there was an emotional responsiveness that I had never had before, so I thought, ok well, this is just a different level of friendship. Well, that progressed, now while this is going on I start to realize this is more than just a friendship. She's having trouble in her relationship, so then we start to communicate probably e-mail was the predominant way and what actually happened is that it sort of turned into an emotional affair. I was actually having an affair, no physical contact, but nonetheless, I was unfaithful. So as this was going on, my husband had been...the first couple of years back he had been laid off. He was unemployed for 11 months, then he worked for a start up and then that ended also. So, I don't know why I brought that up. There was some significance there. I don't know, maybe it was because he had more time on his hands but when he was in his workaholic mode, he was completely unavailable but he was noticing that I was becoming emotionally unavailable. I was denying it because I was probably not believing it myself that this could be happening. And the reason I brought up the e-mail part is he's pretty high tech and so he went in and was able to find the e-mails. So, he found the e-mails, it was clearly an emotional full blown affair going on and he got pretty angry. So, while this is going on; he is being rageful, accusatory, blaming, just...but a side of him that I had never seen before. Umm, but all the while I'm unwilling to change any progress with my new friend, that's how powerful the connection was. I didn't know what it was but I knew it was too powerful to ignore. So, we went to marriage counseling to talk this through and the three of us – he and I and the therapist came to the conclusion that I had to go figure this out or else I wasn't going to be true to anybody. So, that was risky because I was potentially going to lose everything

I had, including my marriage, my family as I knew it, but like I said it was so powerful I felt like I had to do that. Even when I was meeting in these marital counseling sessions, I can remember saying the worst part was that I was hurting my husband because it was completely out of his control. The way I did it was wrong, I got to a point where I was able to admit that. That the secrecy and that part of it was wrong. I apologized for that and that self-forgiveness wasn't difficult. Umm, because I was apologizing for the way I went about it because I just think I handled it wrong, I was being untruthful and sneaking and I mean all the things that go with an affair, that's what I was doing. And so I apologized for that. He accepted the apology and was appreciative of that and so that part wasn't so hard for me to forgive myself for that and it's almost as if it really felt like it was out of my control. I know it wasn't, I obviously made some conscience decisions but it felt, it really felt out of my control there was this force so powerful that I was acting on that and not on my commitment to my marriage. He wanted to work on the marriage, I said we can do that but there's still this other thing going on. So that piece, I still have little twinges of that and as far as the way I went about it but that is not as much...that I'm more embarrassed about that than I am feeling I need to be forgiven. Maybe it's because he forgave me easily, I don't know but that part wasn't big.

JB: Did you believe that he forgave you?

Joyce: Uh, that's a good question. Yes, I felt that I got an intellectual acceptance of my apology, but I didn't get the feeling of yes, I forgive you, all is good. And so there's always been part of me that still is cautious that the rageful, angry, bitter person is going

to come back, cause I never felt like it was from the heart. It was an intellectual thank you for saying that, I appreciate it, apology accepted. Umm, so yes and no. I think also, I think part of the reason I was able to forgive myself for that part is because his behavior was so outrageous and so unacceptable, I mean...he was...I was fearful, he never hit me, he never touched me but I felt threatened many, many times. I was always ready to take my daughter and run because that's how angry he was and overpowering, umm, and he can take over a room and he did. So, there's something in me that almost feels like well, he was acting so badly that the fact that I acted so poorly, it kind of equaled each other out [Joyce said laughing]. It's kind of a bizarre rationale that, maybe that's what it is. The reason I think that is because to this day when he's kind to me that's when I still relapse into not forgiving myself. As long as he can be an asshole and just be an absolute jerk about things I can be...I'm okay. There's almost this way I can rationalize what I did. But when he's the kind person that I knew and the thoughtful person that I knew, umm, that's when I have little relapses. So, back to the chronology I guess, so what happened was we decided I needed to try in house separation, that didn't work, so I moved out and I got a place on my own. And so that was the biggest, that was the first part of feeling responsible for doing something destructive to my child, she was seven. My husband and I sat her down and told her that we were going to be separating, that was the worst day of my life, the worst, to see her little reaction, this little child's reaction. Umm, and the thing that was so difficult for me was that up until this point, he and I hadn't really had big problems, just normal ones and so she had never even witnessed any kind of discord in the house and now her parents were going to separate. I just thought that was the most bizarre message to be giving a child. You know everybody was saying

– oh she'll be relieved and she feel more relaxed. There wasn't anything for her to have seen or heard, we always kept it away from her, so I felt guilty about that, umm, and then just horrendous guilt that I was doing this to my marriage. So, then that progressed to living on my own with my daughter, oh that was the other thing, because then we decided we were going to have 50/50 custody so, I still have trouble forgiving myself that my daughter doesn't have access to both parents 100 per cent of the time. Umm, so that was huge, that was hard for me personally but that's not about the self-forgiveness. For me the self-forgiveness is toward what I did to the other two. Okay, so I go through this process of figuring out what in the world I'm doing and reading books and talking to the counselor and talking to my new partner and meeting up with my husband every once in a while to touch base just trying to figure this all out and after about a year or so, I come to a pretty strong conclusion that I'm supposed to be with a woman in a relationship, not both, not either or for me. I think after having been with her I could not imagine being with him again or being with any man again. And that just to me, I was 43 and for that to be happening at age 43, just shook up my entire being, my world, everything. It was just shaken up. So once I came to that conclusion then...once it became clearer that I didn't feel like it was a choice that helped with the self-forgiveness part because it felt like if I could change it I would. To this day, if I could change it I would, umm, so when it felt like something that just this is the way it was supposed to be that became a bigger piece of the self-forgiveness. Does that make sense?

JB: Yes.

Joyce: What else?

JB: When did you first realize that you had to start the process of forgiving yourself?

Joyce: Hmm, [pause 10 seconds] I don't know if I can articulate this very well but I guess I was probably two years into the process and between the angst of figuring out who in the world I was that absolute pain like I never felt before of the loss of all that husband, family, time with my daughter, all of that lifestyle, huge piece, to between feeling that loss and that struggle about my own sexuality and who I was I was going to self destruct if I didn't let go of something. And I knew I had to experience the grief. There was nothing I could do about the struggle, it was what it was and for me to just put one foot in front of the other I had to let go of some of the...I just couldn't tolerate the physical or emotional...that level of physical and emotional pain it was causing me because to not forgive myself was just...I would...what it would do, it reminds me of if you ever smoked cigarettes and you don't smoke very often and you take a drink and smoked a cigarette upped your buzz a little bit, so it kind of increases the intensity. When I would be feeling badly, sobbing, sad, whatever it was, if I would go to self blame it upped the intensity to a whole new level. And part of it I think I did to feel badly that you deserve I felt like I deserved to feel that badly because of what I've done to my husband and his life and I think about what I did to his life and it just...kills me. Now I'm going to cry and I don't want to. Umm, so that was hard and for about a year, a year and a half my daughter had a really hard time and so and she was 7-8-9-...8-9-10 whatever. And whatever she would go through I couldn't objectively say, well that was

developmentally appropriate, it was all about her gay mother or her divorced parents...you know I attributed it to something I caused, so that's when I started to have to discern what was she going to experience anyway, same with my husband – what would have been his behaviors anyway and what of this would be going on no matter what I had done. But really just for survival I had to let go of some that because it was so destructive, just so painful.

JB: To me what I hear you saying is that part of the process of self-forgiveness, in order for you to get to that threshold and begin that journey there had to be a significant amount of self-punishment.

Joyce: Yes!

JB: The first self-forgiveness that you said “I had to forgive myself for the way I did it”...

Joyce: Yeah, right, right...

JB: Because he forgave you so quickly that you really didn't give yourself a chance to be punished and so is part of that why you still relapse because you have not punished yourself enough?

Joyce: Yeah, that actually really clicks the way you said that because I didn't give myself any punishment for that one. Umm, and so...yeah it does...it there...I still do see glimmers of it and when I do I actually can picture where I was and where he was and the way he said it, umm, and so yeah, I never did give myself a good punishment for that one. So, yes I agree and when you were describing it and I hate this actually but it seems to serve as a pretty decent analogy when...umm...you know...people with addictive issues or alcohol issues reach what they call a bottom before their willing to do whatever their willing to do. It was my version of a bottom only it wasn't a bottom, it was a depth of pain that I couldn't carry anymore. It was too deeply painful...I couldn't function basically, so it was reaching that depth of pain that I said I have to look at this and see...I guess I sought help with what was real. Throughout this whole process and I don't know if this has anything to do with any of this, umm, well yeah it actually does. Because a big part of this was I wouldn't get...the first few friends I told reacted really negatively, critically, judgmentally. Well, what I've since found out is the coming out process is largely based on how well it goes, which makes sense. The first person you tell – oh that's fine you're still you, I still love you then you're more inclined to tell other people. Well, mine didn't go that way and so what I ended up doing was isolating myself and withdrawing from everybody. I didn't answer phone calls, e-mails, I didn't talk to people, I didn't talk to my family, I completely withdrew. And, umm, because it was the same with reaching that depth that I had to start to forgive myself. It was the same thing, I couldn't take on one more layer...like if one more person judged me...I don't know how to explain it, it was a physical reaction, I couldn't absorb any more criticism. I had enough of my own to do, but getting those reactions from friends reinforced that I should

feel responsible for what I'd done. I mean my very best friend put her finger in my face and said you and I both know what happens to children of broken homes and...the finger wagging. So, I got reinforcement that I was responsible for what I was doing to both my husband and my daughter.

JB: Does that reinforcement also validate the self-punishment?

Joyce: Oh yeah! Definitely! And I think that's why I couldn't take anymore, had enough for myself, so I just really couldn't...and I've since, just in the last six months started to reconnect with people. And that's what I said I couldn't risk, me not accepting this because I had enough. I was punishing myself enough that to take on anymore...and what complicated it I guess in feeling responsible for what I'd done was so many of our friends, were both of our friends and I withdrew and so when people would call, I wouldn't answer, so they would call my husband. So what happened was he developed this network of support, poor husband, oh the victim, what has Joyce done, more reinforcement that I'm to blame, I'm to be punished, so that kind of complicated the matter and it just like everything that happened reinforced that I was responsible for bad things happening. Selfish, I felt umm, like part of...when you said you know how did you know it was time, umm, it's when I started to clear a little bit, my head started to clear a little bit and I had to start to discern what was umm, what was I using for fuel for self-punishment and what had nothing to do with it. For example, my role or my reputation in my family is that I'm selfish. So, umm, there's six kids, you know, that's a whole other session but the bottom line is, you know, you know how Joyce is, she'll get



what she wants, she will ask for whatever she wants and get it, blah, blah, blah. So in my mind, embedded in me is that I'm selfish, so what I was doing was very, very selfish. So, more self-punishment, but what I started to say was I started to discern...know that selfish stuff – that's old stuff, that's not now, this isn't about being selfish, this is different. So part of the self-forgiveness was really tied into that figuring out what was going on now and what had to do with past messages, pain all that kind of stuff.

JB: So you had to do some sorting out?

Joyce: Lots of sorting.

JB: Did you have any help?

Joyce: Oh yeah! I went to a therapist, weekly for this whole process. The first umm, phone call...I had seen her when I moved back here about seven years ago. I just touched base...actually this is kind of red alert, when I was in school, I started to...what happened was that this is when I look back I can see more problems in the marriage than I thought there were, the reason I initially sought help from her was I was so stressed out with school and one night I started to tell my husband what a difficult day I had and his exact words were – I don't want to hear it. And thought hmm, that's just not a real supportive statement. So I was talking to this professor, the one that ends up being the one I had a crush on and I said I'd like to talk to somebody. She gave me a couple of people's names, saw this woman for a few times just about getting support. It was

months later and I called her and said, you know what – I've been thrown a curve ball here, I don't know where this came from, I don't know what's going on. So, she was the one that was most responsible or the most instrumental in helping me to figure out what was today and what was, you know, from before. Does that make sense?

JB: Uh huh. You chose self-forgiveness to use your metaphor, to pull you out of the depths but you chose that over anything else.

Joyce: Oh no, I used alcohol for a while. Yeah, I drank, I mean not to the point of drunk and not even a lot in amount but I was consciously choosing alcohol as soon as I walked in the door I drank alcohol. It numbed me like that [Joyce snapped her fingers]. So, I did that for months and I mean I was open with my therapist about it and I am using alcohol to get through this and she said sometimes that's what you got to do, you know, so I didn't feel like there was any kind of concern that I was... I mean I was obviously a little bit concerned and that probably was also part of me choosing something else. I knew I couldn't use alcohol forever and ever, so you know, that was another piece of it. You can't use that, umm, but without that then I'd have this tremendous pain. And so I didn't want to use alcohol, so I decided I had to let go or sort out, the way you said sort out, that was a good phrase to use, sort out what of this was mine and what of it could I let go of.

JB: How did you get to self-forgiveness?

Joyce: Hmm, [pause 5 seconds] umm, [pause 6 seconds] a huge piece is what I've come to believe and it's obviously just a personal philosophy and that is that same sex preferences, the preference is not a choice. So that's been the biggest piece, is coming to that, but that took a couple of years because I didn't know. A big turn toward that...well here's one thing that was an obstacle to it. I didn't have anybody like me. I just wanted to talk to somebody like me. My friends didn't understand, gay people didn't understand, they'd known they were gay for a long time. My husband was my best friend and I didn't have him to talk to. I didn't...I had my therapist she was great but she hadn't been through this. So, in third year I guess, I 'google'd married lesbian' and found that there is actually a therapist in Philadelphia whose clientele is largely women who go through mid life discovery that they would prefer to be with women. And I kind of checked out her credentials, did a little bit of homework and ended up going to a weekend workshop with other women like me. Now all along the way mind you I'm ready to bolt because if there is no one in there with lipstick or nail polish or hair that is, you know, not longer than an inch long, I'm gone. Because I wanted to see somebody that looked like me that was going through this. Not the kind that I was going to go, oh yeah, [Joyce taps her forehead with the palm of her right hand] you know, how it'd take you 40 years to figure this out [Joyce laughs]. So, anyway, I'd stayed for that and there were enough in there. There were about 25 women umm, there were enough in there like me that I decided to stay. And that was the most powerful turning point for me because if you could look at it on a continuum I was at the other end of the continuum in terms of my process. Most of them were either still married umm, almost everybody was still married, had never even...didn't even have a woman in mind, they just had these feelings or they were

having an affair with a woman and their husband didn't know or they were having an affair and their husband did know. And looking at them and watching them torture themselves with blame and guilt, it made it so clear to me how not at fault I was. And this observation that didn't come clear to me until the end was – I had been in a room full of 25, I'll just call them gay for lack of a better word, gay women, not one negative remark about a man. Now I don't know how much time you spent with women but if I would have been in a room full of 25 straight women [Joyce laughing] it would have been all about male bashing. It was just really enlightening to me that these women loved their husbands so much that there's this other force so powerful pulling them and that was a huge turning point for me was seeing where I'd been and being able to look at them and I knew I could say to them – this isn't your fault, be gentle with yourself, you know, this isn't something you chose. And so when I was able...when I saw what I was able to do for them then I realized I could do that for myself. So that was a huge piece, finding like people going through the same thing.

JB: So in essence, is the journey of self-forgiveness relational?

Joyce: Oh, absolutely! Yeah, it's relational with the people that you feel like your hurting, it's relational in your support group or lack thereof, professional help even relationships at work. I have radar out now, commonly know as 'gaydar' but you hear what people say and you listen very attentively and when you hear something that isn't supporting your life now, it's a chance to relapse or to get away from self-forgiveness. So it's relational in a point that you are...I am choosing who to have relationships with

based on who can support my self-forgiveness and not take me back to question myself or be critical of myself. So, it's relational in every way.

JB: Even though we call it self-forgiveness, there is an other involved to help us get there.

Joyce: Oh, the other is huge, for me, it was huge. And that was the irony of it because this selfish reputation I have with my family, really is more about I really never gave a shit what people thought about me. This is who I am, you know it right up front, if I like you I like you, if I don't I don't, you're never going to wonder cause I'm just going to be me. So, for all of a sudden that was the biggest shift in my being I couldn't be who I am around just anybody, so there's this constant editing going on of, you know, these other people. So it was way more about other people than any other situation I have ever gone through. Now that I think about it maybe...I'm trying to think of other times when have had to self-forgive and it's not really ever been that difficult for me – this was.

JB: A couple of questions around feelings. Now you said that there was this pain within the depths. Where would you locate physically? Could you pinpoint the day where what I would call the emotional wound was created?

Joyce: It was the day that I told my daughter that we were splitting. I felt it in my gut because I can still picture when I was sobbing, doubling over, because it was all in my

gut, the pain that...it's not describable, it's not like a knife, it's like a wringing of my gut which just being twisted in there, that's physically where it was for me.

JB: Do you feel different now that you have experienced this process of self-forgiveness and where does it manifest itself physically?

Joyce: Yeah, a feel umm, lighter...I don't know how to describe that better, there just isn't this umm...I would say heavy weight but mine wasn't like I was carrying a weight, mine was this, this it's inside me so that's dissipated umm...

JB: A release?

Joyce: Yeah, release, that works. So, I guess physically it's kind of a whole package because along with self-forgiveness was self-care. So, you know, I now take better care of myself, so I feel better just based on what comes with taking better care of yourself. Exercise has always been my umm, mental health and I didn't for about two years that was miserable for my body. Umm, so now just that I'm back in getting into a routine and taking care of myself I just feel better physically.

JB: If I have never experienced self-forgiveness before how would you explain it to me?

Joyce: When you asked that, I had this vision, now you're going to think I'm crazy, I had this vision of a planet with a ring around it and it's right there, self-forgiveness is right there and it's yours for the taking but it's far enough away that you have to reach out and bring it in.

JB: But it sounds like it can slip back out of your grasp?

Joyce: Oh, yeah! You have, yeah, that's kind of its permanent home and you know, you can invite it in but it takes effort going out to be able to bring it back in. It just isn't out there for the taking without any kind of effort from me. I don't know, it's just for me, for me to get it to work and still does. Maybe it won't always but umm...

JB: How do you live it now? How do you experience it in the way you live your life?

Joyce: It's really not all that different than umm, before because now although I'm not in the depths of despair and angst I'm financially not where I'd like to be, I don't like where I live, I'm not sure about my job, is this what I want to be doing? So there are all these other things now to kind of like these are the realities that I'm facing and it's very similar, I can't go there, I can't do any of that self-punishment again. It's too many things. I have too many other things that I'm struggling, that's an exaggeration, but pondering, trying to figure out and even just being in a relationship with this woman that's its own...you know, that's all new to me, so trying to figure that out, so I can't go there again, can't do that.

JB: Would you say that part of the reason you can't go there is because it has healed?

Joyce: Yeah, definitely, partially, there still a little bit there umm, for example, last week at school my daughter's now 12, one of her friends came up to her and said so and so told me your Mom's a lesbian is that true? So what my reaction is to do is to take that on. And so I did go there for a little while and oh this is my fault and oh she's going to be ostracized and oh she's going to be criticized. However, ironically enough my husband is the one to have said this isn't about you, this wasn't a choice for you, this is about pre-teen girls and she could be the fat girl or she could be the girl whose Dad doesn't have a job or you know, it's more about all that stuff that goes on with girls than about your situation. And I could physically feel that lift but again there was somebody else. It was another person validating that. So it is really very other oriented, really is and I'm sure that has to do with the whole societal piece.

JB: As you described your process of self-forgiveness, it does not appear to have an end point...

Joyce: No, no, I don't picture, I mean I can see myself at her wedding saying God, why does she have two mothers here? Why can't she just have a mother and her Dad and have this be simple? So, it will always be...it's going to be a continual process for me.

JB: One last question, how does it feel now to have told your story?



Joyce: [Pause 14 seconds] Less detached from the world and that's just because it's a story that very few people know, so, if I am able to share it I feel just a little more connected with the world, which for me that's been such a huge loss cause I'm so, such a person that likes to connect with people and part of that in me just being who I am. So, that loss of being that person has been big so to share with you without editing and all the details makes me feel more connected.

JB: Thanks!

Joyce: Your welcome.